



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 26 Eanáir 2021

Tuesday, 26 January 2021

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, for coming into the Seanad today to respond to the matters before us. Before that, by order of the House, I must read out all the Commencement matters that were submitted by Senators.

I have notice from Senator Shane Cassells that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to make a statement on the recent job losses in a number of Irish provincial newspapers owned by the Iconic Newspapers group.

I have also received notice from Senator Joe O'Reilly of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to ensure that the drug, Duodopa, is made available to people suffering from Parkinson's disease.

I have also received notice from Senator Seán Kyne of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the provision of a new emergency department at University Hospital Galway.

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

The need for the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to engage with third-level institutions to consider a reduction in next year's fees for students whose courses were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions.

I have also received notice from Senators Fiona O'Loughlin and Vincent P. Martin of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine to make a statement on the

announcement by Horse Sport Ireland of its planned move from County Kildare to County Dublin.

I have also received notice from Senator Ivana Bacik of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to make a statement on the results of a recent survey carried out by the Federation of Early Childhood Providers on the closure of services due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and to confirm that the sector will continue to receive Government funding and support.

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

The need for the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to make a statement on the introduction of a universal basic income for artists.

I have also received notice from Senator Gerard Craughwell of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Foreign Affairs to provide an update on the provision of an overseas allowance for Irish citizens who represent Ireland as secondees in the OSCE special monitoring mission to Ukraine.

I have also received notice from Senator Timmy Dooley of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education to address the shortage of secondary school places for sixth class students in Ennis, County Clare.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the timelines for the capital building plans for a multidisciplinary early intervention and respite care centre for children with complex additional needs on the grounds of St. Otteran's Hospital in County Waterford.

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

The need for the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to launch a nationwide campaign to highlight the damage being caused to the environment by illegal dumping.

I have also received notice from Senator Catherine Ardagh of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the roll-out of *in vitro* fertilisation, IVF, treatment through public hospitals.

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

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

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

The need for the Minister for Education to make a statement on the provision of additional primary education places for Dundalk south, County Louth.

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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 make a statement on the impact of Covid-19 on placement availability for social care students in the 2020-21 academic year.

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

The need for the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to make a statement on the development of a new national strategy for women and girls.

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

The need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the proposed cancellation of Bus Éireann's X8 Expressway route from Dublin to Cork.

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

The need for the Minister for Education to address the concerns of the leaving certificate 2020 students who invoked the appeals process, and those who sat their leaving certificate examinations in November 2020 and are still awaiting their results.

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

The need for the Minister for Finance to consider changing the rates of taxes on mobility, in particular, stamp duty and inheritance tax, for those wishing to downsize or move house.

I have also received notice from Senator Lynn Boylan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to make a statement on plans to ban the importation of fracked gas.

Of the matters raised by the Senators that are suitable for discussion, I have selected those raised by Senators Cassells, O'Reilly, Kyne, Warfield, Bacik, and O'Loughlin and Martin who are sharing time, and they will be taken now. I regret that I have had to rule out of order the matter raised by Senator Ahearn on the ground that the Minister has no official responsibility in the matter. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Job Losses

Senator Shane Cassells: I thank the Cathaoirleach for selecting this matter and I thank the Minister of State for being present.

Last Friday evening with no advance warning to employees or to the National Union of Journalists, a large number of journalists across a range of well-known local newspapers were

laid off. These included the well-known titles, *The Midland Tribune* and *The Tullamore Tribune*, the *Clonmel Nationalist*, the *Tipperary Star*, the *Donegal Democrat*, the *Leinster Express*, and the *Leitrim Observer*, all of which are part of the stable of the Iconic Newspapers group, owned by UK businessman Malcolm Denmark. This stable also includes other famous titles such as the *Kilkenny People*, the *Dundalk Democrat* and the *Longford Leader*. These lay-offs are in addition to a reduction in working days and hours in the remainder of the newsrooms in these titles. This comes at a time when the public in all of these communities are depending on newspapers and journalists to give them a factual position on what is happening in their local areas in regard to Covid-19 and the impact on their communities. At a time when people are being asked to stay at home, the local newspaper provides them, in particular the elderly, with a connection to their community and, most important, to factual news as opposed to the unreliable dribble that can pop up on social media feeds. To put it in context, a cut of one reporter to a newsroom of a local newspaper can cause news reporting ability to drop by 25% and so the content drops accordingly and a community consequently suffers as well.

No business is being left untouched by the harshness of this pandemic, as the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, well knows in the context of his portfolio. Bar our healthcare teams, there is nobody more deserving than others in that line. I am not arguing that this morning. However, there are 50 plus local newspaper titles across this country, many of them in their third century of operation, which provide coverage of local news, courts, council meetings and sports. They are a record of our local democracy. If one takes that away, one is diluting local democracy and local accountability.

I have two asks of the Minister of State, Deputy Troy. The media landscape in this country and the world has changed massively in terms of how people access their news. I accept that. Many of these local newspapers were previously family-owned operations. In this particular case, some 26 titles are owned by one UK media mogul, Malcolm Denmark. By all accounts the holding company is profitable and so using of the cover of Covid-19 to lay off people is wrong and it needs to be called out as wrong. Business owners who seek to slash employees while remaining profitable need to be called out.

There is another backdrop to this issue. Prior to Christmas, the Joint Committee on Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht held two special sessions on the future of local newspapers in this country with the National Union of Journalists and Mr. Frank Mulrennan of Local Ireland, which represents 46 local newspapers across the country. They had been excluded from the Government supports that were allocated to local radio stations, also much deserving and providing local news coverage and local content to those who listen to them, and they were seeking parity in terms of those supports to the tune of €2.5 million. I remind the House that 91% of advertising revenue, which is the backbone of the income of local newspapers, comes from local shops, businesses and planning notices, all of which have ceased since Christmas and as a result a huge part of their revenue has been taken away. My caveat in respect of that is that profitable companies and newsrooms which seek to lay off employees should not be in receipt of the supports for which I am calling this morning. I made that point to the National Union of Journalists at the committee meeting. We cannot have a situation where a business is taking Government support and at the same time laying off employees.

I ask the Minister of State to address the concerns I have raised this morning and to confirm if Iconic Newspapers is in receipt of the employment wage subsidy scheme that has been made available to many companies around this country. I know that the Minister of State has a passion for local democracy and local reporting such as is provided by the businesses about which

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I am speaking this morning. I am interested to hear his comments on same.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy): I share Senator Cassells's view on the importance of our media. It is important at any time but it is particularly important at a time of pandemic that we can rely on factual, reputable media outlets. I am familiar with many of the newspapers in this particular group, particularly the *Longford Leader*, which is exemplary in terms of its factual reporting, and is anxiously awaited on a weekly basis in so many households across Longford and Westmeath, as is the case in regard to some of the other provincial papers. I extend my sympathy to all the workers who are facing job losses at this time. I fully appreciate how difficult the situation is for those involved and their families in this time of uncertainty. I understand the Iconic Newspapers group has announced a number of proposals, including staff lay-offs and cuts to hours and pay. The Government hopes that these difficult measures may mean that permanent job losses can be avoided as much as possible.

It is normal for businesses to run their own affairs and to respond to challenges in their own way. Government cannot dictate how any business is to be run. Our rule is to ensure there is a framework of legislative protection for workers' rights.

On changing hours and pay, the Terms of Employment (Information) Act 1994 provides that an employer must provide the employee with a written statement of the particulars of the employee's terms of employment. The Act also provides that an employer must notify the employee of any changes in the particulars given in the statement. The Act provides a right of complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission where an employer fails to comply. While an employer may negotiate the terms and conditions of the contract, it is best practice that it should be undertaken in consultation with the affected employee and taking a long-term view of the employment relationship.

Senator Cassells referred to the Future of Media Commission, which was established by the Government in September 2020 to examine the future of media in Ireland. This includes public service broadcasters, commercial broadcasters, print and online media platforms. The commission is examining the challenges faced by public service broadcasters, commercial broadcasters, print and online media. These challenges include sustainable funding sources, changes in audience behaviour and changes in technology. The commission has undertaken a public consultation to which it received more than 750 submissions. It is putting in place a number of online events to explore key themes with stakeholders and the public. The commission is due to report within nine months and its report will inform future media policy, including print media.

In the context of the Government's stated commitment to support independent media into the future, it is regrettable that a company such as Iconic Newspapers is making a restructure of this nature in advance, especially considering the range of financial supports the Government has made available to all businesses across various sectors during the pandemic to sustain them and protect the livelihoods of employees who rely on their employers.

Senator Shane Cassells: The Minister of State correctly stated that there should be consultation in scenarios such as this. That is the exact point. There was no consultation, none. On Friday night, Ian McGuinness, the Irish organiser of the National Union of Journalists, stated, "At a time when we need solid, public service journalism more than ever, we have seen Iconic Newspapers announce their intention to impose another round of savage cuts." These cuts were taken without prior consultation.

I very much welcome the commitment the Government has shown to the media in establishing the Future of Media Commission. This will be extremely worthwhile and it is a very good expert group. The autumn could be too late for many of the businesses in the local newspaper industry in this country. There are 46 paid-for publications employing some 1,000 reporters that are read by 1.5 million people across the country. There has been a staggering decline of €6.3 million, or almost 22%, in revenues arising from the drop in circulation and advertising revenue. I ask the Minister of State again to clarify where we stand on the call from those newspapers to be treated the same as local radio stations. Will the Government make a decision on the €2.5 million sought from the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, before Christmas?

Deputy Robert Troy: The pandemic has taken a terrible toll on many businesses and livelihoods right across various sectors in the economy. The Government has committed an unprecedented level of financial supports to keep businesses afloat and save jobs. The Senator referenced the employment wage subsidy scheme, which was introduced on 1 September. This replaced the temporary wage subsidy scheme and it addresses one of the biggest overheads that any business faces on a weekly basis, which is the wage bill. This Government is underwriting the wage bill of so many businesses in order to protect them and the livelihoods of the employees relying on them. The Government also reduced the VAT rates from 23% to 21% and from 13.5% to 9%. The Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, is also available for businesses that have had to close their doors.

The Senator's query relates in particular to Iconic Newspapers and the request made before Christmas for €2.5 million to the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, and I cannot answer that question. I give an undertaking that I will raise it with the Minister today and revert to the Senator.

Medicinal Products Availability

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, to the House and thank him for taking this matter. Like most people, I am not quite sure how to pronounce the name of this drug, Duodopa, but this is my best shot. It is the only flippant remark I can make about this, as it is otherwise a very serious matter.

Duodopa is a pump-based system that infuses a liquid form of Parkinson's disease medication, levodopa, to provide more consistent relief of symptoms on a minute-by-minute basis. It is very effective and there are approximately 100 patients in Ireland who would benefit from it. Patients would typically claw back three to four hours per day of normal function that would previously have been lost to immobility. There is no question as to its clinical benefit and it is generally used in patients with the most significant disability and who therefore have most to gain from its use. It is worth noting that without it, people may be housebound and reliant on carers, presenting both the people in question and the State with a cost that must be factored into assessments.

This issue relates to 100 patients from 10,000 sufferers of Parkinson's disease, or 1% of the total, but for those 100 people it is the difference between having some sort of quality of life and none. The drug is everything to them. It is like winning the lottery because it provides quality of life for them and their families, loved ones and carers. It is critical to those 100 cases. We are talking about 100 individuals rather than any type of statistic. The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics found it cost-effective at a cost of €30,000 per year. It would be transformative

for those who get it.

A separate but related matter is the development of the national deep brain stimulation service in the Mater and Beaumont hospitals. Deep brain stimulation is a surgical treatment for Parkinson's disease that is an alternative to Duodopa and is relevant for approximately 5% of patients, or 500 people. People have traditionally gone to the UK for this treatment.

That is hardly satisfactory in a Covid context or in any other context. Professor Tim Lynch of the Mater hospital, Dr. Richard Walsh of Beaumont Hospital and Ms Catherine Moran of Mater and Beaumont hospitals, as well as a very nice and helpful nurse named Katrina with whom I had a conversation - I apologise that I do not have her surname before me - and who is extraordinarily helpful and committed to this cause, are all working on this issue.

11 o'clock There are approximately 50 patients waiting for surgery and they hope to perform the first deep brain stimulation in Beaumont hospital this year. A business case for funding for this initiative has gone to the HSE. The Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, allocated €50 million for new therapies in the budget and he specifically mentioned Parkinson's disease in his remarks. Duodopa and deep brain stimulation are central to all of this. I look forward to the reply of the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank the Senator for raising this issue and for giving me, on behalf of the Minister for Health, the opportunity to clarify the position on the availability of levodopa-carbidopa intestinal gel, known as Duodopa, for patients with advanced Parkinson's disease.

As the Senator may know, the HSE has been given statutory responsibility for medicine pricing and reimbursement decisions under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The Act specifies certain criteria for decisions on whether the State will reimburse medicines. The Minister for Health has no role in this statutory process. HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective scientific and economic grounds, including on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE. The NCPE conducts assessments on behalf of the HSE and then makes recommendations on reimbursement to assist the HSE in its decision-making.

The HSE strives to reach a decision on drug reimbursement in as timely a manner as possible. Due to the significant moneys involved, however, it must ensure that the best price is achieved, often leading to a protracted deliberative process. Under an interim agreement between the HSE and the manufacturer dating back to 2014, the HSE agreed to fund this drug for up to 81 patients. The manufacturer agreed to fund the treatment of any new patients above the cap of 81 patients through a medical access programme. However, the HSE was informed in 2019 that the manufacturer had unilaterally set aside this agreement. The manufacturer agreed that it would continue to provide the drug free of charge to patients already on the access programme but stated that it would not be enrolling any new patients in the free of charge access programme after 30 April 2019.

On 14 June 2019, the NCPE completed an assessment of Duodopa for patients with advanced Parkinson's disease and recommended that it should not be considered for reimbursement unless its cost-effectiveness compared with other existing treatments could be improved. This recommendation is available to view on the NCPE website. Following this recommendation, the HSE entered into lengthy pricing negotiations with the manufacturer. When these

concluded, the reimbursement of Duodopa was formally considered by the HSE drugs group over two meetings, the second of which was held in February 2020. At that time the drugs group made a positive recommendation for reimbursement to the HSE executive management team. This was in the context of the recognised unmet need, the clinical evidence, the cost-effectiveness evidence and the resources available to the HSE.

It is important to note that Duodopa is only one of the medicines with a significant budget impact awaiting decision by the HSE executive management team. The HSE has yet to make a final decision on the specific reimbursement application and the statutory process is ongoing. I am happy to report to the House, however, that €50 million has been allocated to the HSE in budget 2021 to enable the approval of new medicines.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I am encouraged by this paragraph in the Minister of State's reply:

At that time the drugs group made a positive recommendation for reimbursement to the HSE executive management team. This was in the context of the recognised unmet need, the clinical evidence, the cost-effectiveness evidence and the resources available to the HSE.

That was in February 2020. I ask the Minister of State if he could arrange, through the Department, for me to get a note specific to this recommendation regarding when it will be implemented and when Duodopa will be available to patients. In the same context, I also ask the Minister of State to get me a brief on deep brain stimulation as a parallel treatment for another 5% of people. I look forward to the Minister of State's response.

Deputy Niall Collins: I will ask the Department and the HSE to follow up on the Senator's requests. We appreciate that Parkinson's disease is a debilitating condition and fully acknowledge that it is a worrying time for patients, families and carers, as Senator O'Reilly outlined in his remarks. I hope for all concerned that a final decision on this reimbursement application is reached shortly. It is important to note, however, that the HSE is the decision-making body for the reimbursement of the costs of medicines under the Health (Supply and Pricing of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The Senator will be aware that the Government has provided €50 million for new medicines in 2021 and it is anticipated this new funding will enable the HSE to approve a significant number of new medicines this year.

Acting Chairman (Senator Pauline O'Reilly): I thank the Minister of State and Senator O'Reilly. I believe there will be follow up on that issue.

Emergency Departments

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister of State for travelling up to the Chamber today, but I regret no one is here from the Department of Health to address this Commencement matter. University Hospital Galway, UHG, is a model 4 hospital providing 24-7 acute surgery, acute medicine and critical care services for Galway and the region. I acknowledge the front-line staff and management who have been operating under difficult conditions because of the impact of Covid-19 for nearly a year now. The staff in the hospital, and especially the accident and emergency department, have managed to provide those services for many decades now.

In December 2015, during Leaders' Questions, the then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, proclaimed

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in the Dáil that “the emergency department at University College Galway [was] not fit for purpose”. In February 2017, funding was provided for the design phase of a new accident and emergency department. The project was included in Project Ireland 2040. During a visit to University Hospital Galway in September 2018 by the then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, we were told by the Saolta University Health Care Group that the planning application would be lodged before Christmas of that year. It was then to be lodged by February 2019. We were then assured that the options appraisal, which was the evaluation of the best use of lands, with a new UHG in Merlin Park, was not going to delay the application.

We were assured that process was not going to delay the application, and that we would not be waiting for that options appraisal to be published before a planning application was lodged. Unfortunately, that did not happen. The options appraisal was published, and thankfully it did state that an accident and emergency department should be proceeded with on the site of UHG. The planning application, however, had still not been lodged. The Saolta group’s design team had designed a seven-storey building, with five storeys for the accident and emergency department and the top two floors for paediatrics and maternity services. It was recommended that the original application should go with a shell and core design, where the top two floors would not be fully designed. They would be allowed to go to planning, and then be designed later. Then that changed, which was positive as they were progressing the top two floors, but that caused a further delay. They were told to do a full fit-out design on the project and that led to another delay in the project.

When I raised this matter with the Minister for Health at a committee meeting in early November, he provided me with information that had previously been provided in response to a parliamentary question tabled by my colleague, Deputy Dillon. The Minister said, “This answer is not satisfactory for the Senator and I am, therefore, going to ask for an additional note on an indicative timeline as to when this will be done, as this is the question he asked, and it needs to be answered.” That question still has not been answered. Anything I say is certainly not a personal comment about the Minister but comes from sheer frustration about the abject delays in a project that everybody needs and wants. The staff do Trojan work. The patients absolutely need this project, which is being delayed not by a lack of funding or by Government procrastination, but by the inability of the Saolta University Health Care Group to lodge a planning application. The group engaged with the city council about a bus corridor, which was welcome, but that delayed the project. The shell and core design also delayed the project. Everything seems to have delayed a vital new emergency department. The existing department was described in the Dáil, by the Taoiseach, as being not fit for purpose over five years ago. I am absolutely frustrated about the lack of progress in lodging a planning application, never mind all of the rest that has to be done to ensure there are tender and construction documents, etc. I look forward to the Minister of State’s reply.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Senator for raising this matter and giving me an opportunity to outline to the House the position regarding the new emergency department at University Hospital Galway.

University Hospital Galway provides regional services for a wide range of specialties that serve a catchment area of approximately 1 million people along the west from Donegal to north Tipperary. University Hospital Galway is a model 4 hospital that provides 24-7 acute surgery, acute medicine and critical care. This project for a new emergency department at University Hospital Galway, which is part of a larger development incorporating maternity and paediatric services, is included in the capital plan for 2021. Approval has been granted to complete a

temporary extension to the emergency department to provide additional accommodation. This includes segregated waiting areas, segregated treatment areas, isolation rooms, additional resuscitation spaces and additional support accommodation to take account of new requirements to treat Covid-19 patients, and improved infection control and prevention requirements for the emergency department. Externally, this also includes enabling works by way of road and car park reconfigurations, and utilities and drainage diversions, that are all located to the east of the main block of University Hospital Galway.

The temporary emergency department extension will be a single-storey building with a rooftop plantroom and will be connected to the main hospital block at the existing emergency department entrance. It is expected that this project will be completed in early 2022. The temporary emergency department project, and associated works, will serve as an enabling works project for the proposed permanent emergency department by helping to clear the site.

The main emergency department women's and children's development at University Hospital Galway is a complex project and is in the early stages of design progression. This project is of significant scale and must progress through the stages outlined in the public spending code. The design team was requested to assess the feasibility of fully developing the women's and children's element of the block at the same time as the development of the lower emergency department floors. This would result in the completion of the full development as one project. This feasibility report has been completed and has been considered by the HSE nationally.

No date has yet been set for the planning application for the main building. A few enabling works projects are required to clear the site before the main building can go ahead. The design team has had pre-planning meetings with the local authority on two of the enabling works projects. Other site enabling works are ongoing in preparation for the main emergency department women's and children's block development, including road and services realignment. All capital development proposals must progress through a number of approval stages in line with the public spending code. The delivery of capital projects is a dynamic process and is subject to successful completion of various approvals, which can impact on the timeline for delivery.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister of State for the response on behalf of the Department of Health. While there was a good deal of information in it, the salient point is that no date has yet been set for the planning application for the main building. Despite Saolta University Health Care Group telling the then Minister, Deputy Harris, in September 2018 that the application would be lodged before the following Christmas, there is as yet no date for the main application for the building. Temporary works are being carried out which will be completed in early 2022. The way things are going, that will be 2023. Of course it is a complex project, and it is stated that it is in the early stages of design progression. People were talking about it and showing us the designs years ago. A great show is put on when Ministers visit. Saolta University Health Care Group said it would lodge a planning application before Christmas 2018, but it still has not lodged it and is nowhere near doing so, by all accounts.

I am greatly concerned by the response from the Department. I am not getting personal with the Minister of State, but I am extremely frustrated by the abject failure to deliver the first phase of this project, which is the planning permission.

Deputy Niall Collins: I hear the Senator's frustration and anger on behalf of his constituents and the people of Galway and the west of Ireland with this ongoing issue and the lack of a coherent timeline. I will communicate his frustration on behalf of the people he represents to

the Minister, the Department and the HSE.

I also echo the Senator's words of thanks and appreciation to the front-line workers in Galway and, indeed, throughout the country. All of us must continue to express our thanks for, and appreciation of, the hard and dedicated work these people do when they turn up every day on behalf of the health of the nation.

Third Level Fees

Senator Fintan Warfield: It will come as no surprise to the Minister of State to hear me say that I believe in a publicly-funded model of third level education and moving towards the complete removal of fees. Universities and colleges have been underfunded for over a decade, forcing them to find money in the private sector or to charge international students huge fees.

I have been contacted by students, as I am sure the Minister of State has been, who feel they have been scammed, quite frankly. They say their fees are completely unjustifiable because key elements of their courses are not taking place. One woman said that class sizes have doubled due to online learning and there is reduced support from lecturers as a result. She says it is double the money for the university, but half the attention for the students. Another student said there have been no laboratory classes for many courses in science, which are the most costly part of these courses for the university. Students say that, typically, science courses cost €2,000 more because of this. Another student said that students are unable to find part-time work, which is a major issue for international students who moved here in September and whose fees are significantly higher at approximately €25,000. On top of that, they are paying Dublin's sky high rents.

The grant of €250 given by the Government to almost every student recently must be seen in the context of the increase in fees for courses, thus offsetting those increases in some way, and where some students will have to complete another semester next year to pass their courses by completing placements and so forth. In that context, €250 is not a meaningful reduction in fees. University College Dublin business school students have asked for a 30% reduction in fees and approximately one third of the graduate medicine students at UCD withheld their fees and have asked that next year's fees be frozen or reduced. I commend them on that. I will say it again. Ultimately, the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in which the Minister of State is involved should be the launch pad to building a truly publicly funded third level model of education. We need to share that burden across our society. Students and their families cannot shoulder that burden or that cost alone. My question, therefore, is this: will the Minister of State engage with universities to ensure that our future doctors, social workers, scientists and teachers are charged a fair amount for what they are getting this year and what they may be required to do next year?

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank Senator Warfield for raising this matter. The fee payable by students can vary depending on a variety of factors, including, of course, the type of course and the student's access route, including previous education. Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies, and the total level of tuition fees payable is a matter for the institutions to determine, including during the period when their delivery methods are adjusted in response to Covid. I am of course very conscious of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on our students. While Ireland is on level 5 of the plan for living with Covid, all further and higher education institutions will deliver the majority of their classes online, with only essential activities being

held on site. While I appreciate that the Covid impacts are disappointing for students who had hoped to have as much time on campus as possible, these measures are necessary to support halting the spread of the coronavirus.

In recognition of the challenges facing full-time third level students, financial assistance is being provided in the academic year 2020-21 to all students who avail of SUSI grants and all EU full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students attending publicly funded higher education institutions in the State. Under this initiative more than 72,000 students who avail of the SUSI grant have received a €250 top-up to their grant, and students who do not avail of the grant but who attend publicly funded higher education institutions in the State can reduce by €250 any outstanding student contribution fee payable or receive a €250 credit note from their institution. This builds on the additional supports announced in July, including a doubling of the student assistance fund, a €15 million technology fund for devices for students in further and higher education and an additional €3 million provided for investment in supports for mental health services and well-being initiatives.

In considering this issue it is also important to note that the State currently provides very substantial support to undergraduate students in higher education towards the cost of their studies. This support has played a very significant role in facilitating access to and growth in higher education. What was previously the preserve of a relatively small proportion of the school-leaving population is now more widely available, as reflected in the current transfer rate from second to third level. This commitment is demonstrated through the free fees scheme, under which the Exchequer provides funding towards the tuition fee cost for eligible undergraduate higher education students with students paying the student contribution. The student contribution applies annually to all students who are eligible under the free fees scheme. The current rate is €3,000 per annum. Currently, 60,000 students have all or part of their student contribution paid on their behalf by the State via the student grant scheme. The total cost of the tuition fee and student contribution supports is in excess of €500 million per annum. The combined impact of these supports and initiatives highlights the strength of the Government's commitment to supporting students in meeting the costs of third level education.

Senator Fintan Warfield: This is the first day of the second semester for many students. The key question I am asking the Minister of State is whether he will engage with the universities. Not everybody signed up for online courses. People could have signed up for online courses. These fees are just completely unjustifiable. People are telling us they feel scammed. We need to do more than the €250 grant. I ask the Minister of State to intervene on this issue with the universities so they can act and help students who are struggling. Will he do that?

The Minister of State mentioned the student contribution charge which is, in effect, fees as far as people are concerned. His party is very proud of its record in education. I encourage him to make this one of his issues in government. Sinn Féin has consistently proposed in budget debates that we reduce the fee by €500 and I ask that the Minister of State consider doing that. I also ask that he engage with universities on this issue. People did not sign up for online courses.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Senator. When the Minister, Deputy Harris, and I engage with the heads of our universities and institutes of technology they tell us that the fact that the vast majority of tuition is now taking place online does not mean that the provision of it is cheaper for them. I am relaying to the Senator what they have said to us.

We are very aware of the difficulties facing students during the pandemic. In general, there

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is a requirement in these exceptional times to have a responsible approach to the needs of students whenever possible. It is important to acknowledge that the higher education institutions have to date shown enormous willingness to respond in numerous ways. I encourage all students to engage with their institutions to discuss any issues in respect of their courses, including fees. I also thank the Senator for raising this issue which is topical to many thousands of students up and down the country.

Equine Industry

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to respond to this particularly difficult and challenging issue. The equine industry, as we all know, is synonymous with County Kildare. It has incredibly positive socioeconomic benefits for our county, which is known as a thoroughbred county not just in Ireland but throughout the world. There are three racetracks, Goffs, Horse Racing Ireland, HRI, 78 trainers and numerous breeders in Kildare. The impact of that in terms of hospitality, restaurants, people working in stable yards, etc., is significant.

It was very concerning to learn before Christmas that Horse Sport Ireland, which is temporarily located in Naas, was planning to move to Dublin. Punchestown is very well recognised as a racing track, as well as for other equestrian sports. It hosts a lot of community events. It had the generosity and magnanimity, under the chairmanship of David Mongey, to offer a site free of charge to Horse Sport Ireland so that we could keep 60 jobs in Kildare. They are people who buy their tea, coffee, lunches, etc., in Kildare. We have also negotiated with the current owner of the former Iris Kellett equestrian centre in Kill, where a lot of State money was used to build an equestrian centre for the 2003 Special Olympics World Games. He has offered to provide its full kit free of charge to Punchestown should the jobs stay in the county. That is very magnanimous.

Business people are involved in putting a business plan together to ensure Horse Sport Ireland, which is an excellent organisation, stays in the county. A lot of funding comes from the State, including some €5.5 million from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and €1.5 million from the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. I ask the Minister of State to ensure that Horse Sport Ireland stays in Kildare with capital funding.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: I thank Senator O'Loughlin for taking this initiative. I am aware at first hand of the love, care, connection and passion as well as the economic appreciation of horses and their welfare. The equine industry in Kildare is second to none. It is a world leader. As I said before, the horse or equine industry is to Kildare what Semple Stadium and Croke Park are to the GAA. It is the spiritual home. In Kildare we consolidate, build, and expand. We do not dismantle, remove or decommission. To remove such an essential piece of infrastructure from Kildare would be as incongruous as removing vineyards from Bordeaux.

I appeal to the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to review this decision and prevent it from happening under his watch. It is not only about Kildare. Of course, I am a proud Kildare public representative, but 14,000 jobs are generated by the activities of Horse Sport Ireland and €816 million is generated. When we put this into perspective we see this is twice what the sheep industry generates. We have to look at this. There is an opportunity here, be it for Punchestown, which would be a fantastic venue, or wher-

ever, to put us as a world leader. It would be such a boost for tourism. It would build on the good work done already and it would represent a type of Abbotstown, the go-to place not only in Ireland but in the world for everything equine. It is a major opportunity. It is not once in a generation; it is a one time ever opportunity. I urge the Minister of State and the Government to look at this carefully.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank both Senators for raising this issue and showing their interest in this area. As the Minister for Kildare, as it were, I take on board the points raised. No one can doubt the passion for my county and my close connection with the equine sector. I recognise the acknowledgement that the Senators, as public representatives for our county, share of the important role that equine activity plays in Kildare. That is important.

It is also important to put some context on what I am about to say. Horse Sport Ireland is a company limited by guarantee. It is the national governing body of equestrian sport in Ireland. It is not a State body. It is recognised by Fédération Équestre Internationale, Sport Ireland, the Olympic Council of Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland. Though it receives some financial support from my Department and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, it is independent of my Department in operational matters and policy decisions on issues such as the location of its office. That is a matter for the board of HSI.

The Senators will be aware that following the recommendations of an independent review by Indecon consultants in 2018, the board of Horse Sport Ireland has been undergoing significant reorganisation. A new board is now in place and all of the Indecon recommendations have been implemented, which is very much to be welcomed.

HSI is responsible for directly running the stud books of several Irish horse breeds and undertakes a range of initiatives in the promotion, marketing, education and training of the sector. Under the current strategic plan, Horse Sport Ireland aims to lead the equestrian sector and enable it to fulfil its potential, grow participation, win medals and be a top breeding nation.

The equine breeding remit is of particular interest to my Department given the increased value that I believe we can bring to the sector. At present, the average price of a sport horse foal is approximately €3,000. Sales of elite foals achieve up to €8,000. I believe we can be ambitious and that we are only scratching the surface of the value of the sport horse in the breeding sector in the context of the income that we can generate for our rural economies. Most breeders only hold two sport horse mares or fewer for breeding. This can be an additional income for farmers. We should definitely be ambitious in terms of wanting to double the base price that we get for our foals. However, that will take significant work and I know HSI has ambitions in that regard. Along with my ministerial colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, I look forward to working closely with HSI in that regard.

HSI has been based in the office in Millennium Park, Naas since soon after it was established in 2007 following the amalgamation of the Irish Horse Board and the Equestrian Federation of Ireland, bringing together the breeding and competition sectors. It is now appropriate, given the passage of time and the evolving role and resource challenges in terms of office accommodation, that the situation falls due for review.

The concept of Horse Sport Ireland having a defined headquarters, national training centre and breeding centre has been an objective since the inception of Horse Sport Ireland and has

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been referenced in every strategic plan since 2009. It is one that I and my ministerial colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine would very much like to see happen. The importance of and need for a national centre of excellence has been well identified by both internal and external actors and indeed by the wider stakeholder group through their contribution to a report called Reaching New Heights, a review conducted a few years ago into which there was widespread stakeholder input.

It should be noted that Horse Sport Ireland is an all-island, national organisation serving 32 counties, and therefore the place it is considering relocating to cannot be confined to only one county, particularly when the breeding and the elite performance side of things are considered.

I am conscious that I have limited time and do not have enough to read all of the note I have here. I will, however, reference that Horse Sport Ireland has a very ambitious hub-and-spoke approach whereby there would be a national centre as part of that model and we would see the development of five regional centres to propose improvements, enhance facilities and enable Irish horses to be produced and have value added in Ireland, which is really important. HSI's headquarters is under active consideration by its board. The board has identified a location for the core of its future strategy, which happens to be at Greenogue, County Dublin, which may fit the organisation's needs in terms of facilities. Other sites have also been mentioned and I am aware of them having been mentioned in the Department. I and my officials will be meeting with HSI early next week and I am aware of other meetings that Kildare County Council and others have had. I look forward to going through the detail of this proposal, which is at a very early stage, and talking it through with HSI next week.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: It is important that Horse Sport Ireland be ambitious and we certainly want it to be. It is important to note that it does need to move from its present premises, but I have no confidence, from what the Minister of State has said, that he is going to fight for it to be retained in Kildare for all the reasons I and Senator Martin have outlined. We had a good Fianna Fáil Minister in Kildare, Mr. Charlie McCreavy, who delivered for the equestrian world and delivered for Punchestown. There is absolutely no reason there should not be a further investment in Punchestown by bringing Horse Sport Ireland there and giving it an absolutely world-class site, which is what it needs for carrying out its functions and work. I accept all the reasons Horse Sport Ireland is a 32-county and national organisation, but moving it from County Kildare which is synonymous, for all the reasons that I said, with the equestrian and thoroughbred world would be absolutely wrong. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, and the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers. I have liaised with Kildare County Council and I absolutely believe we can come together to ensure this stays in Kildare.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Nobody knows better than me how important Punchestown is to the rural economy and to the economy of Kildare. I worked at Punchestown Racecourse for four years and was actually a course builder for a number of summers on the three-day equestrian course, which is a fantastic facility in Punchestown. I would love to see HSI set up in Punchestown. Punchestown has been mentioned, as has Goffs, and there are numerous other places such as the Kill Equestrian Centre, which the State has previously invested in but which is in private ownership. These are all different options that I would like to ensure are fully exhausted.

I also want to see that the approach in terms of capital funding has been fully exhausted by HSI because the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media has a very critical role to play here. I have only been in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the

Marine since 1 July and I have seen maybe three to four different proposals on where HSI will go. As such, I can understand the Senators' concern about this latest one, but from my perspective it is another one I have seen. What I want to see teased out is the real potential we have to develop a state-of-the-art system that will see an improved system for HSI. Ideally, as Minister for Kildare, so to speak, I would love to see it in the county, but from a 32-county perspective we must get this right for the long-term future of Horse Sport Ireland.

Childcare Services

Senator Ivana Bacik: I welcome the Minister to the House and thank him for coming in himself to take this important matter. I have raised this matter to seek clarity as to the status of early years services. As the Minister knows, early years services and childcare providers are concerned about the lack of clarity and certainty around their position. In recent days and weeks, I have been engaging extensively with providers, those involved in the SIPTU Big Start campaign and with Seas Suas, representatives of which communicated yesterday with all Oireachtas Members, seeking clarity on the full reopening of the sector and asking what public health criteria will be used to enable them to reopen fully. We are all aware that childcare providers are now in their fourth week of offering services on a reduced basis to the children of essential workers. Many of them are deeply concerned about their safety in their work environment and there are also issues around not operating at full capacity in terms of funding and resources. A survey by the Federation of Early Childhood Providers found that, of 706 early years and childcare services that participated and have been open on a reduced basis since 4 January, 14% had a positive Covid-19 case resulting in the closure of either pods or the full service. Some 67% of their members indicated that staff were uncomfortable attending work as they feel unsafe in their work environment.

We know that a Cabinet decision is due today and we understand that a lockdown until 5 March is likely. In that context, the childcare providers providing services and the staff going into work every day to provide that service are entitled to greater clarity.

A further issue that has been raised with me relates to the roll-out of the vaccine and where childcare staff will be in the prioritisation list to receive a vaccine. That is also a matter of great concern. We know, from the SIPTU Big Start campaign, that as many as 79% of early years professionals do not have access to sick pay. There are multiple issues for those working in the sector. There are also issues for those of us who are parents and issues around child safety. In a context where the Government appears to believe it is not practical to introduce an aggressive suppression strategy, as the Labour Party has sought, including mandatory hotel quarantine, it is extraordinary that we are potentially facing months of children being denied the opportunity to return to school. Crèches and childcare providers will not be able to open fully. Children requiring additional education still face a level of uncertainty and businesses remain closed while it is not practical to enforce the rules on non-essential travel. I looked at the arrivals and departures at Dublin Airport and there are flights going out to Lanzarote every day this week. It is extraordinary that those could be classed as essential travel. I am glad that the Government is going to implement stronger enforcement of those rules but we, in the Labour Party, have called for an aggressive suppression strategy. That is clearly what people want and what we, as a country, need to try if we are to reduce our transmission rates and then keep them low because we know about the uncertainty over the vaccine roll-out and its timing. It is clear that we are going to need a longer-term strategy than it appears the Government is prepared to take. I am

disappointed about that. It is an important context within which childcare providers deserve greater clarity and assurance on reopening.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank the Senator for raising this important issue. I acknowledge that even in level 5, childcare professionals are continuing to provide childcare services and school-age childcare for the children of essential workers. They are also providing services to vulnerable children and that is an important support in the economy which did not happen during the major lockdown of March 2020. I express my gratitude to people in the entire sector for all they are doing. The Senator will know that the early learning and care and school-age childcare services that are providing childcare to the children of essential workers and vulnerable children are fully funded by the State through all the existing departmental funding schemes, including the early childhood care and education programme, ECCE, scheme, the national childcare scheme, NCS, the community childcare subvention programme, CCSP, and the training and employment childcare, TEC, programme, whether children are attending or not.

Services that are currently closed due to the fact that they have the permission of the Department, including all services that deliver the ECCE scheme and other services for which there is no demand from eligible parents, are also receiving full subsidies from all of those schemes.

The public health advice continues to be that it is not necessary to close preschool or childcare services due to a risk of Covid-19. ECCE has been closed as part of the general effort to reduce movement across the community, not because there is any risk to either the children or the childcare professionals working in those services. However, it is important to acknowledge, as I think we all do, that no environment is without risk of Covid-19. To reduce and mitigate that risk, we have very detailed guidelines for the childcare sector which have been implemented with great rigour across the sector since May of last year. Between 1 November and 15 November, there were 85 notifications of the presence of Covid in a childcare service. It is important to note that not all cases of Covid-19 in a service will result in the full closure of a service or of a pod. Where there is evidence of a confirmed case within a service during the infectious period, the HSE works with the service provider to decide what measures need to be taken. The HSE has informed my Department that, in 2021 to date, fewer than five childcare services have been directed to close fully as a result of Covid-19.

The Senator raised the issues of vaccination and testing. My Department has been engaging rigorously with the Department of Health on the issue of vaccination. Early learning and care staff and school-age childcare staff are 11th on the list of priority for vaccination. This means that they are given greater priority than those aged 55 to 64 in other occupations important to the functioning of society. Obviously, we have an evidence-based allocation strategy. Should the evidence change, I will certainly advocate on behalf of the sector.

More than 1,800 childcare services are currently open and providing childcare to the children of essential workers and to vulnerable children. All of these services continue to receive funding from the full range of departmental streams. Services which are closed with the permission of the Department also receive the full subsidies. Services which are currently closed with permission, including the 1,500 early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme-only services and 800 other services, are receiving *force majeure* funding, as will services which are directed to close due to public health considerations arising from Covid-19. Childcare services in which there is no demand for childcare from eligible parents can also apply for this funding on a weekly basis. All childcare services continue to get funding from the employment wage

subsidy scheme, which makes up approximately 50% of their total funding. The sustainability fund is also available to services that have issues with regard to sustainability.

Senator Ivana Bacik: While the Minister did not address the broader issue, I thank him for the comprehensive response on the specific issues I raised with regard to childcare. I am advised that some services are still having difficulty in meeting operational costs and there was concern that they would be unable to recoup funding where they were unable to open due to staffing issues. I am glad the Minister has provided some clarity on that point. I would like to engage with him further on the future Covid-19 sustainability fund which he has mentioned and to which he has said services facing financial difficulties will soon be able to apply. That is certainly welcome.

The Minister has said that fewer than five services are fully closed but the survey certainly indicates that there has been a higher rate of cases resulting in the closure of pods within services. That remains a matter of concern.

I will finish, as did the Minister, by acknowledging the vital work of those who continue to provide this essential service throughout the pandemic. I will continue to advocate on their behalf. I look forward to further engagement with the Minister on this issue.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: There has been rigorous engagement between my Department and the sector over recent weeks and particularly since the higher level 5 restrictions were introduced. We have had eight meetings of the childcare advisory group at which representatives have met officials of my Department. I have attended seven of those eight meetings myself because I know this is a difficult time for providers. We continue to work with providers and wider groups such as SIPTU, which is representing childcare professionals, to make sure the sector remains sustainable and to make sure we can keep it open for the parents who are essential workers and for vulnerable children. We will continue to work to develop schemes that will maintain funding for the sector while also addressing the issues of sustainability. Different childcare services have different funding streams and their funding comes from different sources. Some are more reliant on fees from parents. We will be addressing these issues in the near future.

Sitting suspended at 11.50 a.m. and resumed at 12 noon.

Death of Former Member: Expressions of Sympathy

An Cathaoirleach: Senators will be aware that the late Senator, Professor Brian Hillery, who was a Member of this House from 1977 to 1997 has died. Brian served a term in the Dáil from 1989 to 1992 representing the people and the constituency of Dún Laoghaire. He was a native of Miltown Malbay in County Clare and was a nephew of the former President Patrick Hillery. He was a very popular Member of Seanad Éireann, where he had many friends. He was an astute and widely respected politician and a gentleman of great wit and integrity. Along with his success in business, he will be remembered for his many other public roles. He was Ireland’s representative on the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, director of the Central Bank and a member of a number of public bodies that advise the Government. On behalf of Seanad Éireann I express my sympathies to his wife Miriam, daughter Cliona and

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sons Conor, Eugene, Brian and Gavin, as well as his extended family and friends. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis. I ask Members that we observe a minute's silence after the Order of Business.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Regina Doherty: The Order of Business today is No. 1, motion regarding the appointment of members of the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business without debate; No. 2, motion regarding the reappointment of the Ombudsman for Children, to be taken on the conclusion of No. 1 without debate; No. 3, statements on the Covid-19 vaccine programme, to be taken at 2 p.m. and to conclude at 4 p.m., with the contribution of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given no less than six minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 4, statements on the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, resumed from last week, to be taken at 4.15 p.m. and to adjourn at 6.15 p.m., with the contribution of all Senators not to exceed six minutes and, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the statements made on this day and the statements to be thereupon adjourned.

An Cathaoirleach: Today is Australia Day. We hope the 30,000 Australians living in Ireland, the 25 million Australians living in Australia and around the world, 5 million of whom have Irish heritage, and the 70,000 Irish men and women living down under have a happy and safe Australia Day. Although we are divided by time zones and Australia is half a world away, we are united by a shared history. This year is the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Ireland and Australia and the 80th anniversary of the first meeting between an Irish Taoiseach, Éamon de Valera, and an Australian Prime Minister, Ben Chifley. Diplomatic relationships continue to flourish under the new Australian ambassador to Ireland, H.E. Gary Gray, who arrived last year. Three Australian Prime Ministers have addressed Dáil Éireann and perhaps the current incumbent, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, will be the fourth to do so. We wish all of our friends in Australia and the Australians in Ireland a happy and safe Australia Day.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I thank the Cathaoirleach. On behalf of the Fianna Fáil group, I join the Cathaoirleach in celebrating Australia Day and extending our deepest condolences to the family and friends of the late Professor Brian Hillery, a distinguished and accomplished public servant who did a great deal in his life. We wish his family well and hope they are doing okay at this difficult time.

I support the Order of Business, as outlined by the Leader of the House. I will raise three issues. The first, on which we may wish to have a debate with the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, is one that has come to light in County Mayo in recent weeks. It is the manner in which Vodafone Ireland seems to be accelerating the development and building of telecoms infrastructure throughout the county. It came to light principally because of a particular case in Ballintubber, my home village, where a 25.5 m high mast is to be erected, essentially in the backyard of a family with two small children living in the middle of this rural village. What has galled members of the community is the manner in which the planning application was submitted. The site notice was put up on 12 December 2020 in the run-up

to Christmas and in the middle of Covid-19 restrictions. It was by sheer luck that someone in the village spotted the site notice and alerted other members in the community to give them an opportunity, as is their right, to make representations and lodge objections on behalf of the community. If one were to be cynical, one might suggest that the applicant hoped the site notice would go unnoticed during that period. I have since become aware of three other applications made in the past two weeks in County Mayo for large installations in rural areas. Communities are very worried about this. Nobody is against development or infrastructure. We want to have telecommunications infrastructure but there is a better way to deal with communities and erecting a site notice in this manner is not the way to do it.

The second issue is the Covid-19 testing facilities in different communities. I have anecdotal evidence concerning the testing facility at MacHale Park in Castlebar, which is used to service the entire county. Unfortunately, some people with suspected Covid-19 who are travelling to the facility are stopping off on their way to and from the testing facility to do their shopping in Tesco and Dunnes Stores in Castlebar. That is remarkable. I have received anecdotal evidence that some people arriving for the test have shopping bags in the back seat of their vehicle. If people have been referred to a testing facility, it is because they are suspected of having the Covid-19 infection and may infect other people. I implore people not to stop off in public places and risk the lives and welfare of other citizens. I am sure these incidents are not confined to Castlebar and are also taking place in other locations.

The final issue relates to 14-day quarantine. We need to have a debate on the suggestion that zero-Covid is an attainable objective in this country because in my view, it is not. However, we need an open, honest and transparent debate in which we engage with all stakeholders and citizens on an issue that has become topical in recent weeks.

An Cathaoirleach: Although I have Senator Craughwell listed as speaking for the Independent group, I might ask the father of the House to address the Chamber.

Senator David Norris: I wish to raise the nonsensical notion of enforced fobbing in during the Covid pandemic. The Government has launched an intensive PR offensive instructing everyone to stay at home and work from there. I am in five vulnerable categories - I am 76 years of age, diabetic, a transplant survivor, immunosuppressed and just out of hospital after the removal of another tumour. I have a doctor's certificate that covers me completely, but some half-witted civil servants have decided that they will only partially accept it. Who are they do challenge medical opinion? I have received a demand for the return of €550. It is not the amount that matters, but the principle of the thing. How dare they do this to me? I demand that the Government take action. If there is a statutory instrument, it should be immediately reversed, by legislation if necessary. I demand action. The whole nonsensical notion of people fobbing in should be scrapped immediately. I hope there will be support throughout the House for this demand.

Regarding Covid, I will pass on a little bit of what I hope is wisdom. I have found that, if one looks for the beauty in small things, one will find joy and peace. I actively enjoy the act of breathing oxygen. I savour it. It is such a small thing and we would not be alive if we did not do it. Look at birds. Birds are so beautiful, even the bloody seagulls that are such a nuisance ripping up rubbish bags and scattering rubbish and filth all over the place, yet they are so wonderfully elegant when they fly, they can give one pleasure. Take pleasure. Look for the small things. Look for the joy and beauty in life. Despite the pandemic, that beauty is still there and we should all celebrate it.

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Senator Mark Wall: I wish to raise two issues today, the first of which is a call for an urgent decision on the 2021 leaving certificate. Like many Senators, I have been contacted by a large number of students and parents alike who continue to seek certainty for themselves and their loved ones. Across the House, we have all carried out our own surveys to gauge the feeling among students in particular about what they would like to see happening in respect of their leaving certificate. The survey I conducted showed an overwhelming wish for predicted grades with the option of a written exam. Given what these students have been through and the months of class time they have missed, there can be no doubt that the traditional leaving certificate cannot proceed as normal this year. The experiences of the past two years have shown the urgent need to reform the antiquated leaving certificate regardless, but that is a conversation for another day. Today, I am asking the Leader to bring to the attention of the Minister for Education the desire of all among the leaving certificate class of 2021 to have an urgent decision on what will take place this year. I also ask that she highlight to the Minister the growing desire for predicted grades with a choice to sit a written exam at a later date.

I will take this opportunity to thank our teachers for their continuing work. Many I know and others of whom I have been informed have taken the time to check on the mental health as well as educational welfare of those in their classes, which will be noted by all.

This is an urgent request on behalf of many. From my experience as a parent of a leaving certificate student and as a public representative, the overwhelming desire is for certainty. This would stop the stress that many are feeling. News time for leaving certificate families revolves around just one question daily, namely, whether the Minister said anything. The same question consumes junior certificate families, who would also welcome a decision on the future of that exam. The class of 2021 has been through much in these unprecedented times. Let us give these students the relief that an announcement on these exams would immediately bring.

The second issue I wish to raise is the urgent need for the Minister for Transport to consider allowing the Air Corps to provide and operate part of the forthcoming maritime search and rescue aviation contract. I wish to add my voice in support of this consideration. I am aware it has been raised by Senator Craughwell previously. I am also aware that the Minister for Defence indicated in replies to parliamentary questions that he has asked his Department to engage with the Department of Transport on this important matter, exploring the option of the Air Corps providing some element of the next contract within obvious domestic and international obligations. Indeed, during Leaders' Questions in the Dáil the Taoiseach also referenced this engagement between the two Departments and the possibility of the Air Corps being involved, mainly from its Baldonnell base, to serve the eastern side of the country.

I ask the Leader to bring this to the attention of the Minister. There is always a huge risk in only having a private company carry out this contract. Other countries that allow private companies operate part of their search and rescue capabilities ensure they retain some sovereign capabilities through their armed forces. The Labour Party and I believe Ireland should do the same.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: Today, I would like to raise the issue of the redeployment of lactation consultants, which many of us will be aware of. What is really important to understand is that this is in the context of having only four community lactation consultants in the whole country. It is also in the context of some hospitals having part-time lactation consultants within the hospitals themselves. There is the figure of 18 hours in University Hospital Galway, UHG, in terms of lactation consultant. This is not elective treatment. This is not something that

can be put off until the end of a pandemic. This is often essential medical help.

We also have an over-medicalised birth system in this country where 45% of first-time mothers are having a caesarean. That is well above the average internationally. That is a massive figure. I had a caesarean and we rely on the medical experts to tell us whether it is necessary or not but I think the statistics stand on their own two feet and show us that something has gone wrong. After a caesarean birth and after induction with syntocinon, it is very clear from the research that it is incredibly difficult to breastfeed. People need support and we now have a system where a woman does not even have her partner in the hospital. Then she is locked away in her home without the supports most of us here who are mothers would have had and she has no access to a community lactation consultant. I believe that as of last night another lactation consultant has been redeployed.

This comes down to a failure to implement the national maternity strategy and a failure in relation to infant health. Some 75% of women say they want to breastfeed and yet only 37.3% come out of hospital breastfeeding. Something is going wrong and now in the pandemic we are making even more mistakes.

I urge the Minister for Health to engage with all of the organisations concerned. Over the last few days, I have spoken to the Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services Ireland, AIMS, the Association of Lactation Consultants Ireland, ALCI, La Leche League, Cuidiú and Friends of Breastfeeding Ireland. I ask the Minister to do the same and understand that all of these people who are engaged with voluntary services are without exception mothers who are home-schooling children as well. They are managing during the pandemic to give up their free time because the State is not putting in place the proper supports for women and babies. This will have a long-term impact on their health.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach agus an gCeannaire fosta. I remember when I came here first in 2016 I would very often advocate for the Government to prepare for constitutional change. Many of the responses were that it was not the time, asking why I was raising this and saying that people were not talking about it and that there was no need for this. The onset of Brexit and the Covid crisis has crystallised the immediate need for a conversation about how we function in the here and now and, more importantly, how we function going forward in the years ahead.

At the weekend we saw a LucidTalk poll published that showed a clear majority in the North in favour of a referendum on Irish unity being held within the next five years. That is another poll in a series of polls that indicates that common trend. There is an unstoppable, vibrant and flourishing conversation under way on the constitutional future of our island. It is an inclusive conversation that involves nationalists, unionists and those who consider themselves to be from neither background. There is of course an irony in now having a US President who in the past has championed and advocated for Irish unity. We also have very senior figures from within political unionism now acknowledging the need to be engaged in this conversation to prepare for future changes, yet we have a Taoiseach who buries his head in the sand. I do not say that to poke anyone in the eye. I acknowledge that there are colleagues across the political groups in this House and in the other House who are now engaged in that conversation too and are advocating for that conversation to take place. I welcome and encourage that, but it must be replicated urgently at a Government level.

It also needs to be replicated in these Houses. We have a stake in this debate as well and we

should not back away from that conversation. We should be confident in whatever our view or position is on the constitutional question. We should be assured and also allowed and given the space to advocate our own position and not be shut down or told that it is not the time. One way or the other, a referendum is coming. Of that, I am convinced. I am very enthused and excited by it because I believe in the transformative potential of Irish reunification for everyone, from Kerry to Derry, from Galway to Dublin. I hope colleagues can join me in that call. I also hope we can all be champions and ambassadors for an inclusive, positive, diverse and welcoming dialogue that seeks to improve the lives of everyone as we move forward.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I echo what Senator Norris touched on earlier. A few of us in here have underlying issues. I have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, COPD, and I have to travel from Donegal to Dublin. It is only evident that I am working when I am here and I fob in, but last week I attended loads of committee meetings and met the Minister for Education. However, none of that is on record. That is a discussion we need to have because we are also human beings. I am not above the law. I cannot come up and break the rules. I am staying at home and taking the advice of the doctors and I am encouraging the public to do the same, yet at the end of the year the record shows that I am not carrying out work. That is very unfair not only for me but for many Deputies and Senators. That is a conversation that needs to be had.

It was worth coming up from Donegal to speak to Members of the House. I was going to bring this point forward as a Commencement matter, but I did not have the time to raise it. We all know there is an outbreak of Covid-19 and, unfortunately, there is a rapid outbreak of Covid-19 within the Traveller community from Cork to Dublin to Sligo, and from Mayo to Galway. Last week, I dealt with numerous calls from people who do not have water to wash their hands, a safe place to self-isolate or clean water to drink. I also received a call from someone on a halting site who I am very close to, to say not only was there an outbreak of Covid-19 but there was also an outbreak of hepatitis A. People in this House are aware that hepatitis A is something we do not see in countries like Ireland but in developing countries. If we look at the sustainable development goals and how we treat citizens and young people, the Traveller community is treated like dirt. We say everybody is in this together. White, settled people are in it together, but the Traveller community is put aside. Unfortunately, I am seeing that reality. I am living with these people. This is my family. To a certain extent, they are just seen as dead Travellers, but so many people in our community are dying right now due to Covid-19. I understand people in all walks of life are dying. I call on the Minister for Health to support the Traveller community when it comes to clean sanitation. All we want are our basic human rights to be met, especially during the pandemic. I thank Safetynet for all its hard work on halting sites, in direct provision and with the homeless. I would appreciate if the Minister for Health would take action. It relates to accommodation and safety. This is a public health issue especially regarding hepatitis A.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator for raising that issue.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I propose an amendment to the Order of Business that No. 6, the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill 2021, be taken before No. 1. This Bill seeks to ensure that everybody who needs to use period products obtains them free of charge. This follows on from a commitment in the programme for Government. The Bill imposes an obligation on the Minister for Health to produce a scheme to set out and regulate access to free period products. I hope my colleagues will support my proposal to amend today's Order of Business.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I join the Cathaoirleach in paying tribute to our former col-

league, Professor Brian Hillery, on his tragic death. Ar dheis láimh Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

I ask the Leader to facilitate a debate next week on the Government's Covid-19 plan. The people have found this third lockdown much more challenging than other ones. Therefore, there is an onus on the Government to level with the people in a very clear coherent way and not in the drip-feed way that we have grown accustomed to in recent days. The debate and the roadmap should centre on the road to 5 March and from 5 March. I will give some examples where we need clarity. On education, we need clarity on special needs, exams as mentioned already this morning, and the reopening of schools. Do we let construction happen or not? We have received conflicting messaging on vaccine roll-out. All these matters require clarity from the Government.

In addition, what does the Government intend to do on mandatory quarantining? Where will these centres be? Who will be responsible for them? What is the import of that not just now but in the immediate future for everybody on this island of Ireland? How will the Border be policed? Added to all that is the issue of transport with Brexit as reported in the media in recent weeks and discussed at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Networks last week. We have the issue of our tourism and hospitality sector. Ministers need to stop drip feeding and tell people in a clear coherent manner what will happen after 5 March.

I also ask for a debate on a zero-Covid strategy and not have a pathology of division and opposition but have a real informed debate about what a zero-Covid strategy means.

An Cathaoirleach: I call Senator Craughwell and thank him for allowing the father of the House to speak ahead of him.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I wish the Leader of the House a happy birthday.

I agree with everything Senator Norris said this morning. We are the one workforce in the country that has no representation anywhere. They can change our terms and conditions of employment and we have nowhere to go, which brings me on to another issue. About two weeks ago there was a newspaper article about a very senior civil servant - I know I am not allowed use names so I will not - who was intending to move from one Department to another with a bump in his salary of €81,000. We were told it was €112 a pace as he walked from one Department to the other. How do we equate that with the issue of pension abatement, which is theft of a pension? Regarding pensions and pension rights, today's newspapers report former Members of this House who were found guilty of wrongdoing and were given their pensions. We were told a pension could not be touched because it was a property right. There are prisoners in Mountjoy Prison in respect of whom the Department of Social Protection tried to stop pension payments and the Supreme Court ruled a pension is a property right and cannot be touched.

We are in the crazy situation that the position of Captain of the Guard in the Houses of the Oireachtas has been advertised yet no retired member of the military or the Garda Síochána who might wish to apply for that position, as their predecessors did, will apply because of abatement while a retired member of the PSNI or a retired British soldier can apply for that position and, if successful at interview, will not only be paid a salary for the job but will retain his or her pension.

The Government needs to decide if abatement is legal. I believe it is not. If there is no proposal brought forward soon on this matter, I will take it to the High Court. I cannot do it on my own behalf, but I will do it for those who are currently suffering. I would like to know if the

Leader agrees with me that abatement is theft of a property right.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I want to speak today about the impact lockdown is having on our education structure. Understandably, most attention in the last number of weeks has been on those preparing for the leaving and junior certificate examinations. We now need to give more consideration to the impact on those currently in primary level education. Irish and international research has shown the impact at this level can be very significant and particularly severe for those in marginalised communities.

For primary school children, the lockdown has created new inequalities in learning time. Research has shown that before the pandemic there was essentially no difference between the time that children spent on educational activities, but during the lockdown last year learning time among primary school children from marginalised communities fell at a far greater rate than for other children, meaning their learning time was over an hour less every day and 31% less than for other children. There is no reason to believe that this is not the case in the current lockdown. Over four months of the last calendar year, children from these marginalised communities have been, unfortunately, losing ground on their classmates. When speaking to primary school teachers at the weekend I was made aware that it was only when they were delivering the homework to these students that they realised the conditions and challenges that lie within. Learning time is closely linked to achieving positive educational outcomes and those who have suffered from reduced learning time over the last year are at risk of this being an issue this year and beyond.

I recognise this is an exceptionally busy time for the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley. I ask the Leader to request that she come to this House at the earliest opportunity for a discussion on how we can improve the lives of primary school children going forward.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: The programme for Government and the 2021 legislative programme reference the introduction of a gambling control Bill. When it is it proposed to bring forth that Bill and will the Leader indicate if the Government is willing to ensure its speedy passage to enactment?

While 64% of our population engage in some gambling, some 29,000 people do so problematically to a level that damages the family and the individual, leads to a trail of destruction and causes psychiatric disorders, alcohol and drug misuse, physical and mental health issues, separation, divorce and insolvency. We need a regulator and initiatives such as a cap on bets. I believe there should be a €100 cap on bets, but that is to be debated. We need warnings similar to those in respect of cigarettes. We need addiction supports. There should be advertisements in bookmakers and on betting slips, etc., drawing attention to the issue of gambling. I am pleased that the national lottery has proposed that only debit cards should be used for online betting. This is rather than other cards, because at least then the cash is there. Each week there should be a notice on the phones to say to a person that he or she has spent so much this week on gambling. It is a very serious issue and I will keep reminding the Leader of the House about it because I sincerely believe that we have a moral duty to get in here. Every one of us know of people who are hit in a huge way by this. We should do something about it.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator for raising that important issue.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I am heartened to see the Fianna Fáil Bill on period products. The House should note that Senator Rebecca Moynihan and the Labour Party put down a Bill

on period products just last week, which is No. 11 on the Order Paper.

I wish to raise two issues today. We have spent many months calling for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to come to the House to discuss co-living and the sheer volume of co-living planning applications in the system, especially in Dublin. I repeat that call now. On 23 December a ban was announced but when we see the detail of that ban there are very serious concerns, the first of which is the failure to apply the ban retrospectively. We spent a lot of time in this Chamber before Christmas discussing why we could retrospectively apply income tax to the recipients of the pandemic unemployment payment last year, yet when it comes to co-living applications going through the planning system there is a failure to retrospectively apply that. It seems to be one law for developers and another law for others. The ban is not comprehensive and there are exemptions whereby if there is a proven need in a particular area then co-living is permitted. Right now in Dublin city 55% of people on the social housing waiting list are single individuals. It is not beyond the bounds of probability that co-living could be permitted into the future. This has a very real impact on a small part of Dublin city, most notably the area I represent which is the north-west inner city, where more than 1,000 co-living units are going through the planning system currently. Within 12 months we could see 1,000 co-living units within 1.6 km in the north-west inner city.

The second issue I want to raise this morning very briefly, which is important in the context of the pandemic, is around childcare. I am aware that many childcare operators are going through a lot of difficulty and a huge amount of uncertainty but, for those who can, I ask that they please provide refunds to families who are not using their services. One of the largest childcare providers in the State, if not the largest, is effectively making up its own rules as to which families are or are not essential workers. There is one instance of a family being told "no, you are not getting a refund because you are an essential worker" but the employer is saying to the family that they are not essential workers. We ask that the Minister would come out to provide clarification as to who should and should not be entitled to refunds. It is not acceptable that the largest operator in the State would act in this manner.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Sherlock might table that particular topic as a Commencement matter.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I join in expressing sympathy to the family of our former colleague, Deputy and Senator, Professor Brian J. Hillery. I offer my condolences to his family who are grieving at this time.

It is great to see Senator Norris back in the House and I am glad that he is recovering well. I must point out that the same loophole on fobbing in applies to Members who have had a baby recently, or what the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission deems as those Members who are on sick leave, as the Commission determines it. The certificate only covers those who are in attendance on an equivalent rate to Members who have clocked in on the same band. It does not cover the whole period during which a Member is out looking after the newborn child. Obviously, the issue of maternity leave for politicians is on the agenda at the moment and it really needs to be looked at along with the fobbing in system. The number of days that Members fob in does not reflect the work Senators and Deputies do on a daily basis. The system as we know it is not fit for purpose. I did not come to speak about that but I hope the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission will look at the matter urgently.

In the past year, 43,000 calls were made to An Garda Síochána relating to victims of domes-

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tic violence. Charges of domestic abuse rose by 24% last year and calls to An Garda Síochána relating to domestic abuse rose by 16%.

I am proud that in the previous term this House introduced coercive control legislation, demonstrating that we really listen to the needs of women. There were three convictions last year, demonstrating the huge need for this legislation. I ask people in the House to continue supporting their local domestic violence charities, including Safe Ireland, Women's Aid and the rape crisis centres, along with so many other local charities. It is so important that they get the support they need because there are so many women in need. The big message from An Garda Síochána is that the travel restrictions do not apply to those women who are suffering domestic abuse. They should know that.

I second the amendment to the Order of Business proposed by my colleague, Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee.

Senator Emer Currie: For somebody like me, the question is not whether I want a united Ireland but what kind of united Ireland I want. It is a question of what kind of united Ireland I have wanted since I was old enough to understand my Irishness was different from that of somebody who lived in a neighbouring county and that this could never be taken for granted. It is very difficult to explain how one can feel pride and longing at the same time.

We will never get there if we cannot be honest and do not understand and empathise with every perspective and truth on this island. We know from the Good Friday Agreement, finding peace when it seemed so elusive, that this is where we can find progress. Talking about a singular all-island Covid strategy as if it is as deliverable as it is logical is deeply disingenuous. It deepens the disconnect of perspectives and the realities of North and South. It takes something that instinctively feels right, easy and simple but diminishes the truth that it is, unfortunately, just not that simple.

It is not enough for me that a certain party continually calls for an all-island Covid strategy because it is the logical solution. It is and to many of us it feels like putting aside identity and putting lives first. It is not like that for all communities that share the island and Sinn Féin knows that well. Let us ask its party members what they are doing about it and what have they done. What are they doing to bridge perspectives beyond their own? If the answer is "nothing", they are offering nothing but false hopes when people are losing their lives, and that is unforgivable.

We will get nowhere in building a shared island or a shared Covid strategy if we refuse to recognise and acknowledge different perspectives and truth. The work of reconciliation, respect, compromise and consensus-building is required not just today but every day and we should all work to that. In the absence of an all-island Covid strategy, which I wish we had, we must align as much as possible and put our energy and efforts into that. We should all work to that too.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Lá breithe sona don Cheannaire. I join the Cathaoirleach in marking Australia Day, and it is important in our new world to look at ways of furthering cultural, education and trade links with our friends in Australia.

I will raise two matters. The first is the aftermath of Brexit, and it is welcome we are finally beginning to see Rosslare Europort blossoming to a far greater extent. It has been an underutilised jewel in Ireland's transport crown and the expansion there is very welcome. Much

credit must go in particular to the management and staff there. One of the challenges, now a matter of urgency, is the completion of the Oilgate to Rosslare M11 motorway. There have been some delays but if we are to look at the long-term development of Rosslare Europort, now our closest point to continental Europe, that section of the motorway must be completed.

I know we have called before for a debate on planning and local government. The Leader is aware that local authorities around the country are reviewing their development plans. I am increasingly concerned by the power grab going on by the Office of the Planning Regulator. This is an undermining of local democracy. I do not believe the planning regulator fully understands what is happening in local communities with regard to local settlement patterns. Even more serious is the fact that there is a concentration of power in the hands of one individual or office ahead of the views and interests of local councils and councillors. All Members are aware of the importance of development plans in their cities and counties and it is essential that we have a full debate around the powers of local government but also, in particular, this effort at a power grab by the Office of the Planning Regulator.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: When Senator Byrne speaks on planning issues, he deserves to be listened to. Well over a decade ago, at a time when it was not popular to do so, he was one of the few lone voices in this country to speak out against the sporadic and haphazard rezoning which was the order of the day. I know he featured in an award-winning episode of “Prime Time Investigates” which looked into the issue.

On the evening of 2 August 2011, a young postgraduate university student from Carrickmacross lost his life in most horrific circumstances in a hit-and-run accident which occurred while he was cycling home outside Carrickmacross. The driver of the vehicle involved was a repeat offender who was on bail from several courts at the time. That family have just one question: how come someone like that was at liberty on that fateful night? They are calling for a public sworn inquiry. The scoping inquiry recommendations are due to be published on 29 January. Their publication has been delayed on several occasions. That would be cause for inquiry in itself if the learned judge did not receive prompt and full co-operation from the various authorities. The scoping inquiry has taken almost two years. The latest date it has been put out to is 29 January. The family cannot suffer the pain of a further extension. The scoping inquiry relating to Maurice McCabe took just six weeks. The comparison and contrast is galling. No family should ever have to go through that. We cannot turn back the clock. All Mrs. Lucia O’Farrell and her family want is the hope that no other family will have to endure the ongoing pain and suffering they have had to endure and that it can be avoided for others in the future.

Senator Garret Ahearn: Like Senator Byrne, there are two topics I wish to discuss. The Covid restrictions support scheme was introduced in budget 2021 to help support businesses during lockdown, essentially during lockdowns at level 3 or higher. Under the scheme, qualifying businesses can apply to Revenue for a cash payment of up to €5,000, or 10% of the business’s revenue. A business must self-declare to Revenue that it has been disrupted by 75% compared with levels in 2019 as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions. There are approximately 17,600 businesses receiving support totalling up to €173.3 million. The scheme runs until 31 March 2021. Last night, the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, stated that there will be a slow reopening of this lockdown and that many businesses, especially those in the hospitality sector, will not be reopened by April. It is my sense that we must act now to extend this vital scheme for businesses right up to and through the summer months. In my constituency of Tipperary, there are 680 businesses receiving support of more than €4 million. The scheme has been extremely helpful to those businesses through December and into the new year. It will give clarity to the

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businesses that are going through an extremely difficult time if the scheme can be extended as quickly as possible.

The stay-and-spend initiative was also introduced in the budget in October. It was initially expected to cost the Government approximately €270 million. It is an initiative whereby if one spends €625 per person, one can claim back €125. Only €6.8 million of the total amount, however, has been spent up to the middle of January. Essentially, that has been because hospitality businesses have been closed since September, except for a few weeks in December. The stay-and-spend initiative is due to run out at the end of April. Given that it is impossible to benefit from the scheme now because of the nationwide lockdown, it would be wise and important to extend the initiative beyond April, into the summer months and perhaps longer.

The Minister has stated that he is flexible in this regard, but it is also important to stress that the stay-and-spend scheme was originally introduced to encourage people to travel within Ireland and not to go abroad. The incentive can be spent locally, so when businesses open in the months to come it will be possible to spend just over €25 in home town locations to support businesses there. If we extend the scheme beyond April and into the summer months, therefore, it will certainly give support to local businesses.

Senator Eugene Murphy: Lá breithe sona duit freisin, and I hope an Ceannaire has a nice enjoyable day and it will be possible for her to get some time to relax with her family this evening.

Many important issues have been raised. I lend my support to all of them. I want to stay in my county now and raise an issue I have highlighted here before. This story may not be big news in Dublin or Meath, but it is a major issue for the people of County Roscommon. The Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, addressed this issue on behalf of the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works, OPW, Deputy O'Donovan, in late November, I think. I refer to the issue of the severe impact that flooding is having on people in an area near Lough Funshinagh in mid-south Roscommon.

I visited the area, as an essential worker under the Covid-19 restrictions, at the weekend. To say that people are in a desperate situation is an understatement. As I explained before, what is involved is a turlough that used to disappear. In 2016, however, an unusual situation occurred, and the turlough has started to flood. Since then it has continued to expand, to the point now where in the coming weeks at least seven families will have to leave their houses. That is the gravity of this situation. This is a farming area. When I was there, I saw that the cattle and sheep sheds had flooded and the animals had had to be removed. Those people are desperate.

I acknowledge that the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, who has responsibility for the OPW, and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, have met. I am requesting the Leader, however, to ask the Minister and Minister of State to meet a small deputation - virtually of course, because it will have to be - regarding the difficulties being experienced now.

This problem can be solved. There is a solution, but we must bring the OPW, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, and everybody else involved together as quickly as possible to see if we can move forward. This is a desperate plea and I know the Leader is a good person to bring this message back to those concerned. I ask her to get the Minister and Minister of State engaged again, so we can have a brief meeting to enable us to move forward and to save

these people from absolute desperation. This is a desperate cry from those people.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I was also very sorry to learn of the death of former Senator Brian Hillery. I met him many times in these Houses and outside. In addition to being an accomplished person, he was also a very pleasant man to meet. Ar dheis Dé go raibh sé.

Before Christmas, the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, published a report on her Department's review of the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989. In one sense, that report was welcome. It indicated a more moderate and sensible approach to the issue than we have seen to date, especially in the wake of the Private Members' Bill on hate crimes which we debated here in November. I had occasion to criticise that Bill, as did others.

However, I have significant concerns about the Department of Justice's report, and I ask the Leader to schedule a debate on it here as soon as is possible in these strange circumstances. On 18 December, *The Irish Times* reported that officials in the Department of Justice believed that any new hate speech legislation must outlaw Holocaust denial. I am conscious that Holocaust Memorial Day is tomorrow and it was marked in Dublin last Sunday. It is a very important event and I support it fully, as we all do. Holocaust denial is something odious and ridiculous.

The question, however, is whether such views should be a crime, and whether historical facts, as such, should be given the protection of criminal law. Indeed, it is also a question of whether stupidity should be a crime. I wonder where that would end. What has prompted this reflection was the fact that the report published by the Minister does not contain a single word about Holocaust denial nor does the Department's research into hate speech legislation in five other jurisdictions. I wonder why Department of Justice officials are briefing the media on items that are not proposed and mentioned in the report. Are proposals being concealed from the Oireachtas? If that is the case, what is the point in producing such reports?

We are all familiar with the RTÉ sketch that took place on New Year's Eve, which caused gross offence to Christians, and Catholics in particular. I do not believe that type of speech should be prohibited, under law, as hate speech. I was quite satisfied that RTÉ gave a full apology. If that is enough for a State broadcaster like RTÉ then why do ordinary citizens need to be policed by hate speech legislation? I would be very grateful, a Threoraí, agus lá breithe sona duit, if we could have a debate on that in due course.

An Cathaoirleach: Finally, I call Seanadóir John Cummins.

Senator John Cummins: I would like to use my time this afternoon to talk about the construction sector and the impact the current closure of sites across the country is having not only on the industry as a whole but more specifically about the impact it is going to have on housing supply this year. As the Fine Gael Seanad spokesperson, I believe that a debate is needed on what essential construction actually is. While there is no doubting the fact that hard measures were and are required to ease pressure on our health system, the hidden reality of lockdown for many individuals, and families, is that they are in cramped or overcrowded situations, and the only way that is going to be addressed is to have a supply of housing units. I acknowledge that certain construction sites involved in the provision of health and educational facilities, and social housing, are permitted. However, the reality is that every housing unit that is delivered in this State contributes to resolving the housing shortage crisis, and that is not solely constrained to social housing. It is also the case in terms of the provision of private housing for purchase and rental because each unit, in turn, frees up stock for others. I am strongly of the opinion that

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all residential construction sites should be deemed essential and enabled to get back to work as early as possible.

To be clear, if restrictions are to be continued across the wider construction sector throughout February then that prioritisation should be given to residential construction sites over commercial builds as that would reduce the flow of people and workers in the sector, much like what we are trying to do in education with the provision of education to children with additional needs. I hope that the Leader will agree with me that an urgent and graduated approach where prioritisation is given to residential construction sites is the appropriate way to go and it does need to be actioned as early as possible.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the Leader to respond to the matters raised on the Order of Business, I wish her a very happy birthday. In normal circumstances we would nearly buy her a cake with just one candle and we would have a proper celebration but due to Covid restrictions we will have to wait until another day.

Senator Regina Doherty: I will let the Cathaoirleach off the hook.

An Cathaoirleach: I call the Leader, on the Order of Business.

Senator Regina Doherty: I thank the Cathaoirleach for his good wishes. It is one of those birthdays that makes one get a bit wobbly.

An Cathaoirleach: We have all had those.

Senator Regina Doherty: Yes, but they come a bit faster as one gets older.

I say to Senator Cummins that the construction sector is an interesting one. I agree with him that, first, there is a need for a debate and, second, there is a need for clarity as to what is essential and what is not. While we can all say absolutely that the building of every single house, whether it is an apartment in a very salubrious area or all the way up and down the list, I do believe that they are essential. Again, it is against a backdrop of where we were trying to reduce the mobility of people and our citizens around the country. I also would say that the reason the list is quite needed is that very close to where I live there is a huge commercial site where a data centre is being built that is far from essential and it is very illustrious on a daily basis. So I think that that is definitely needed.

There is a standing invitation for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to come to the House, and I think this will relate to other people's requests. He was due to come to have a debate on housing, in all of its forms, with us in the next two weeks.

That has now been changed to March because our schedule changed and it did not align with his, which is unfortunate. However, these are the times in which we are living and we are all trying to work and co-operate with each other.

In response to Senator Mullen, the report of the review of the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act was released and made very interesting reading. As the Senator said, there are some glaring omissions but the Minister is bringing forward new recommendations in February with regard to new legislation she has planned relating to the Act. If that is the case, we would very much welcome her to the House to have a discussion on the report and her new proposals at that stage.

To respond to Senator Murphy, I will call the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, today. It is an awful situation where people find themselves with nobody to listen to them. I will call the Senator later today and if it requires a letter to request a meeting, I will certainly do that this afternoon. That is no problem.

I agree with Senator Ahearn on both the issues he raised. I would go further and say that the CRSS and the stay-and-spend scheme should be extended to whatever length of time there are restrictions on our lives. We all hope they will be fewer rather than lengthier but given some of the announcements in the last couple of weeks and what we expect to hear from the Cabinet today and, indeed, the difficulties of the pharmaceutical companies with supplying the planned vaccinations that we all so avidly await, there is definitely a requirement for an extension to the supports both to encourage people to spend if and when we ever get the hospitality sector open again and, more importantly, to support those businesses that are restrained or closed at present. I believe a review of the CRSS is required, and I raised this with the Minister by letter yesterday. Many businesses do not qualify for the CRSS funding simply because they are not customer facing, as in people walking in off the street, yet the vast majority of those businesses have had their business closed down because their customers are closed down and therefore they have nobody to whom they can deliver their product. It definitely must be revised to bring those businesses into play because they are and will be much needed when the economy opens. The Tánaiste said yesterday that he believes the economy will soar when it reopens. I hope to God he is right, as does every Member, and we will need the businesses that are in sleep mode at present to be able to turn back on again. They will only be able to do that with continued support from the State, so I will follow up on that.

To respond to Senator Martin, it is horrendous that the family in question has had to wait for so long. I can only hope, although I do not know if this is a fact, that the Covid restrictions for the last year have played some part in the delay. I will make inquiries today about the date of 29 January. Fingers crossed, it still stands but I will refer back to the Senator's office later.

Senator Byrne spoke about the extension to the motorway. I do not know if a delay is planned but now that there is a great deal of talk about investment in Rosslare Europort, its ownership and how we are going to proceed, there is no doubt, given the constraints of Brexit, and we have not even started to really feel them yet, that serious investment by the State in Rosslare Europort is going to happen. It will be very welcome for that region and the county. However, it has to be alongside the final part of the motorway from Oilgate to Rosslare. The Senator and I know, because I holiday in Wexford every year, the impressive impact it has had in reducing the time of one's journey from anywhere in the country, and particularly from Dublin, down along the east coast. It certainly is the last piece of the jigsaw that needs to be completed. I will write to the Minister for Transport today and ask him what the plans are and, given the importance of Rosslare Europort, if there is any way to speed up those plans. I will send the Senator a copy of the letter.

I thank Senator Currie for giving her views as an Irish person, in a respectful and thoughtful manner, on how she feels we should be moving forward with regard to unifying our country.

I concur with Senator Ardagh's reflections today. We used to talk about domestic violence as being a hidden crime. It was not something that women, particularly victims of such crime, spoke about or dwelled upon. They found ways to try to conceal and survive. However, in the last year we have seen that it has become far more easy to discuss this difficult topic. There is a greater acceptance now that it is something that should not be hidden, and it is not hidden. The

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very welcome passing by the Houses of the coercive control legislation in the last number of years has shone a light on the most insidious behaviour by partners in certain couples.

The most recent and welcome judgment in that very high-profile case a number of weeks ago should send out a very serious signal not just to the perpetrators of that kind of violence but indeed to the victims that there is now a challengeable way to have one's case heard and legal recourse supplied to it. I also concur that some of our charities were very fortunate last year. An awful lot of them were not because they have not been able to fundraise in the same ways as previously. The charities the Senator mentioned, particularly Women's Aid, are probably some of the most deserving, as are many of our other domestic violence charities such as the rape crisis centres and Safe Ireland. I wish to put on the record that I totally support what the Senator said.

In response to Senator Sherlock, the standing invitation to the Minister is there. It is really unfortunate. He was due to come before the House not next week but the week after. That has been put back to the beginning of March. The Senator is right that we need to know whether a ban is a ban or whether it is a ban with conditions. Right now there seem to be far more leaks in the ban than there are controls, so I will certainly ask again for a statement on that.

Senator Joe O'Reilly talked about the Gambling Control Bill. He is right that it was a very welcome development to hear this morning that the lotto will no longer allow citizens to use their credit cards to speculate and to play the lotto because it is pure gambling. I know we think of it as a fun and supportive thing to do, but at the end of the day it is gambling and is as insidious as all the other gambling that exists for people who do not know how to do it in moderation. The supports are definitely required and the addiction services are absolutely required, but all those will only come in real merit when the legislation is passed. I do not know when it is due to be published but I will certainly ask the Minister today and come back to Senator O'Reilly. We will champion it and bring it forward from this House as soon as it is published and the Minister is ready to bring it before us.

Senator Crowe talked about the impact of lockdown on education. While he is right - and he was talking predominantly about primary school children - that perhaps the delivery of their education is being impacted more than is the case for some of our older children and older students, I have to say that the experience in my house is probably slightly the opposite. I have two secondary school children and two third level children. The secondary school children start their education at 8.40 a.m. and do not come out of their rooms until 4 p.m. I see them for barely ten minutes for lunch. It seems relentless, and I am really conscious of the fact that they are missing their walk to school in the morning and their break with their mates at 10.30 a.m. It is an awfully long time for young people to be sitting behind their screens in Zoom meetings. We all do it, and I think we take it for granted, but the Senator himself will know how knackered one can be at the end of the day, even from just sitting in the same spot. We need to be reflective of all the impacts the new world is having on our younger children, our teenagers and our third level institutions. I will certainly extend an invitation to the Minister to come and talk about education during lockdown.

Senator Craughwell talked about pension abatement. I will plead the fifth in response to the question he asked me, particularly given I was in the Department at the time that case was taken. There is a serious flaw there in that we can have one rule for people who are resident and receiving their pension in the Republic of Ireland and an entirely different rule for people who are outside of this jurisdiction when it comes to getting jobs in the Republic of Ireland. That

probably needs to be looked at, but I have no doubt but that if the Senator does not get a successful answer, he will take the State to court, as he has done successfully in the past.

A number of Senators talked about fobbing in. The only thing I will say about it is that it is under consideration. The Houses of the Oireachtas Commission, the Houses of the Oireachtas and the people who run this establishment we all call our workplace are very conscious of the changes we have made to protect the staff, to protect ourselves and to reduce the mobility of people around the country. I think all the other conditions that are associated with those questions and requests of us probably need to be reflected upon, but I bow to the commission and await a response from it.

Senator Buttimer asked for a debate on where we are going on our roadmap from here to March and where we will go from March onwards. Obviously, I expect that the Minister for Health will make some announcements later today. Just to inform the House, I was only informed when I came into the House this afternoon that the Minister for Health will now not be in a position to attend the House this afternoon to take our statements on Covid because of the announcements he will make later. We will have one of the Ministers of State this afternoon to hear our concerns and suggestions regarding the vaccine roll-out. I expect, however, once the announcements are made this afternoon, that we will schedule a debate, if not next week then thereafter, on the roadmap for the coming months. Senator Buttimer made a very valid point. What we do not need is to hear something on a Friday, something slightly different on a Saturday and something totally different on a Sunday and then collective announcements on a Monday or Tuesday. I think people would rather we had one form of communication, even if it were only weekly, the same as we have all become so used to the biweekly announcements by the CMO and his team. I think we will ask for a debate on that roadmap next week.

I am very happy to accept the amendment from Senator Clifford-Lee. I have no problem at all with doing that. I welcome the debate over the next couple of weeks on the two Bills on the Order Paper. I have no doubt that we will all be singing off the same hymn sheet and want the legislation enacted so that we can move on and stop having to beg for equality in this country. Senator Flynn is no longer here. The only thing I can say to her is that in this day and age for her to be experiencing the difficulties she is still experiencing is a crime. When I had the privilege of being in the Department of Social Protection, I took a trip to Offaly to meet some wonderful women in the Traveller community who were trying to support employment. On that day, one of the ladies brought me to a temporary halting site because she wanted me to meet her family. Only she and her extended family were living on the site. More gorgeous people one could not meet. The reason she brought me there was because the site had no running water or electricity. They had been living on it for 24 years with no possibility of being moved somewhere more permanent. In my mind, 24 years is permanent enough. When I made representations to the local authority, I was told it could not provide water or electricity because the site was temporary. That is the most Irish nonsense that I have ever heard in my entire life. I guarantee the House that the site still has no water. Therefore, it is absolutely no surprise to hear the Senator talk so emotionally about the impact of Covid on her family and community when we cannot even give them the dignity of running water and essential services in the places they call their home. It is an absolute disgrace.

If it is okay with most Senators, I will write to the Department today to instruct all local authorities to ensure that every halting site has running water and electricity provision and that the Department of Health, as the Senator asked, makes sure that sanitation and the rise of new diseases that we thought were long past in this country are addressed in that community.

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Senator Ó Donnghaile asked for a constitutional change. I have no doubt that it is coming but I genuinely believe that if the outcome is as I know he would want and as an awful lot of Irish people would want, it is crucial that it is planned and not railroaded just because the polls are telling us that something is good. I can tell him from experience that the polls have a way of slapping one in the face in a very quick manner if one does not manage things properly and thoughtfully. I hope that we would all work together.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly referred to the redeployment of lactation consultants. It is interesting to consider who in the medical profession has been redeployed over the past year. We all know why it has happened and was needed, but they all relate, in the main, to services and provisions for women and children. That is something we should all reflect on. While we know we are in the middle of a pandemic and that medical staff needed to be brought to the front line, why were the services for women and children, in particular children with special needs, drawn from? We need to rethink the way we think in more ways than one in this country. I am very glad to hear that the issue in Galway has been resolved, but it needs to be resolved in every single county in the country. Something as crucial as breastfeeding a brand new baby is not something that can be put off. It is something that we are less good at than our European counterparts, and we have known that for years. Is it any wonder why that is the case when the likes of this can happen? I will write a letter to the Minister today to make sure that is brought to his attention.

Leaving certificate 2021 is something on which a decision should be made incredibly quickly. The issue was raised by a number of Members last week and again today. The Minister received a letter from us last week suggesting that while we all know it is a difficult decision and the parameters are entirely different this year with regard to predicted grading than they were this time last year, where there is a will there is a way. There is an enormous amount of stress and anxiety, not just among our leaving certificate students. We can sometimes tend to overlook them because there are only 17 or 18 years of age. We need to communicate clearly with students. I welcome the meeting with the ISSU leads and the Minister last week. We need to communicate clearly with students because it does not just affect them. Their entire families, including their mums, dads and siblings, are living with that anxiety. It is causing a level of stress that is not needed. We would welcome a very speedy and quick resolution on the leaving certificate.

Finally, the Fianna Fáil leader, Senator Chambers, brought up several issues. It is difficult to believe that she is being given anecdotal evidence that there are people going for Covid-19 tests who are popping in for milk or bread either on the way there or on the way back. I sometimes wonder if we have stopped communicating. Sometimes, when we see the same sign on the way home every evening, there is a day when we do not see it because it has faded into the background.

We need to have a serious conversation about bubbles. I read a story over the weekend of a lady who spoke about her bubble. She seemed to have 18 people in it. We need to remind people that the people in a bubble should be few and far between and only when there are elderly parents or younger parents who are parenting alone who absolutely need help. It must be confined to the smallest number of visits on a weekly basis. We need to talk about travel restrictions. We need to remind people who are going to the hills in Kildare or Wicklow that although it is outside in the fresh air and it is great, it is not okay if it is more than 5 km from home. We need to remind people to ask whether it is really worthwhile going to Lanzarote on holidays when they have to come home and see the impact of the devastation and deaths that

we are seeing all too many of each day involving friends, families and loved ones. There is not a county or town in the country that has not been impacted by losing someone. In my town we have lost approximately five people so far. We need to refresh our message and remind people how crucial it is to do all the things that we have been asked to do for the past 11 months and possibly for the next couple of months as well. It is for our own good, the good of our public health and the good of the welfare of our communities and society.

An Cathaoirleach: I join other Senators in highlighting that tomorrow is the United Nations international day of commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. It is important that the House and all nations remember the victims of the most horrendous crime against humanity in the last century.

Senator Clifford-Lee has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business: “That No. 6 be taken before No. 1.” The Leader has indicated that she is prepared to accept the amendment. Is the amendment agreed to? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

Minute’s Silence for Former Member

An Cathaoirleach: As I indicated earlier, I call on Members to be upstanding for one minute’s silence in respect of former Senator Brian Hillery.

Members rose.

Free Provision of Period Products Bill 2021: First Stage

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to secure the provision of free period products.

An Cathaoirleach: Is there a seconder for the proposal?

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I second the proposal.

Question put and agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to take Second Stage?

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: Next Tuesday.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Tuesday, 2 February 2021.

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Appointment of Members to the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission: Motion

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

That Seanad Éireann, noting that the Government on 6th January, 2021 nominated Emily Logan and Hugh Hume for appointment by the President to be members of the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, recommends, pursuant to section 65(1)(b) of the Garda Síochána Act 2005, that Emily Logan and Hugh Hume be appointed by the President to be members of the Commission.

Question put and agreed to.

Reappointment of Ombudsman for Children: Motion

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

That Seanad Éireann recommends Dr. Niall Muldoon for re-appointment by the President to be Ombudsman for Children.

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting suspended at 1.20 p.m. and resumed at 2.05 p.m.

Covid-19 Vaccination Programme: Statements

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and thank her for taking the time out of her busy schedule to address us on this important issue.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank the Cathaoirleach. I am representing the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly.

The World Health Organization declared the prevalence of Covid-19 to be a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020. Although we are now nearly a year on from that, I know that for many it now feels that it has been a lifetime. Since that day we have found ourselves living very different lives from those we would previously have expected or hoped for. We now find ourselves living what would once have seemed a surreal existence where the things we took for granted are the things that put our loved ones at risk. However, throughout all of this we have found the best of ourselves and dogged determination, and we have worked tirelessly to care for and protect the lives of others. Public and private sectors have collaborated and innovated with a view to finding ways to save lives.

In the space of that year, we now have vaccines that are safe and effective. Two have already been approved for use in Europe and more vaccines are on the way. As a consequence,

there is hope that we may be seeing the beginning of the end of this pandemic.

Acting on behalf of member states, the European Commission has negotiated six advance purchase agreements with a range of vaccine suppliers to date. The EU emergency support instrument has been leveraged to provide upfront funding to facilitate negotiations, secure production and lower costs to member states. The vaccines that have been approved are produced by Pfizer BioNTech and Moderna. They have been reviewed by the European Medicines Agency which has provided significant assurance that they are safe and effective. These vaccines are currently being administered as part of Ireland's vaccination programme. A third vaccine supplier, AstraZeneca, recently submitted its application for approval to the European Medicines Agency and may receive approval from the Commission as early as this coming Friday.

Issues have arisen, however, with regard to the vaccine supply. Reduction in the quantity of the Pfizer BioNTech vaccine supplied across the EU for one week has proved challenging. These reductions in supply were required to allow the company to make necessary changes to expand its production. Pfizer BioNTech has provided assurances that this reduction will be resolved speedily.

Of more significant concern is the recent indication that AstraZeneca will not be available to meet its initial delivery commitments once it has received market authorisation. It is estimated that the deliveries in February will be at the lower end of what was anticipated and there will be further significant impact in March. The Department of Health is monitoring this changing situation and is continually engaging with the Commission and the company. I and the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, are very concerned that this supply issue was only communicated to the member states just a week before the scheduled authorisation was to be given for the vaccine.

Subject to the regulatory approval and delivery of vaccines, the vaccination of the third group in the Government's vaccination allocation strategy, the over-70s, will start next month. It will begin with the older of those, aged 85 and older, followed by those aged between 80 and 84, before progressing to those aged 75 to 79 and 70 to 74. It is planned that those vaccines will be administered by GPs in their surgeries and the HSE is preparing a public information campaign and will ensure that everyone knows in advance when, where and how to access their vaccine.

As of 24 January, 143,000 doses of vaccine have been administered to healthcare workers and residents in long-term care facilities. Importantly, the HSE began administration of the second dose of the vaccine last week. These will be the first cohort of persons to be fully vaccinated under the programme and the progress shown is a credit to all involved. I extend many thanks to the HSE and its staff for the hard work and dedication they have shown.

Plans are being progressed to ensure vaccines can be delivered at a pace as delivery volumes increase significantly over the coming weeks. This scale-up is being progressed through partnership with GPs and pharmacists and, ultimately, delivered through mass vaccination centres. To facilitate the roll-out of this programme, I am pleased to note that the mass vaccination of 1,800 GPs recently took place in three locations across Galway, Dublin and Laois. In addition, planning is ongoing to mobilise further mass vaccination centres soon to meet the expected increase in supply. Some adjustments to the original target doses being administered by March may be necessary to take into account AstraZeneca's recent announcement. It is important that everybody is aware how dynamic the situation is with regard to the supply chains and that Ire-

land has to employ an agile plan to react to such changes. The Minister for Health previously stated that he expected all adult residents to be vaccinated by September and that remains our target. However, as the Minister stressed, that is contingent on existing commitments on the approval, supply and delivery of vaccines. There are important caveats that have sometimes been missed in the national discourse. We want to give people as much clarity as we can but we must be honest about the many variables and challenges with which we are grappling. It is important to note that more research on the vaccination of children is needed. This research is ongoing. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine has been approved for those over the age of 16 while Moderna has been approved for those over 18 years of age. As stated, under the Government's allocation strategy, children will be vaccinated if the evidence demonstrates safety and efficiency. This is standard practice. The Government will continue to monitor and adapt its plans as data emerge.

A key challenge to be addressed as the vaccine roll-out accelerates is the presence of Covid-19 in an increasing number of care facilities. This will require follow-up vaccination visits after the initial roll-out phase. Such visits are planned to take place at the earliest opportunity.

While everyone will be entitled to vaccination under the programme, it is not possible to vaccinate everyone simultaneously. The Covid-19 vaccine allocation strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. This was endorsed by NPHET and approved by the Government on 8 December 2020. This strategy was developed by the national immunisation advisory committee and the Department of Health. Given that limited amounts of vaccine will be available initially, it will take some time for all to receive vaccines. This necessitates an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death or serious illness receive the vaccine first. To date, more than 4,800 HSE staff have received training and now work as vaccinators. The timing of vaccination will be subject to vaccine supply, logistics and the characteristics of each vaccine. The priority is to vaccinate and protect the most vulnerable among us first, and to use vaccines directly to save lives, reduce serious illness and protect our healthcare workers.

The roll-out of the largest vaccination programme ever seen in Ireland gives rise to a set of complex and difficult challenges, some of which have yet to be resolved. The promise of a return to some sort of normality which the vaccines represent gives rise to public expectation that cannot be met in the short term. The existence and roll-out of the programme, however, undoubtedly represents a good news story. In the space of less than a year, we have also seen the benefits of unprecedented collaboration between the public and the private spheres, between the initial spur of invention and the channelling of investment to foster it. The end result is that we now have vaccines, which are currently being administered. They will continue to be administered for free and will be available to all.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, to the Chamber. I thank her very much for her informative address. I am very glad to hear that there will shortly be a public information campaign on the schedule for the roll-out of vaccination because my office is getting a lot of queries from people who are concerned about how to get the vaccination. They wonder where they should go, whether they have to register and what they should do. It is therefore great that there will be a campaign. Will the Minister of State speak to those in her Department to ensure this information will also be available in Irish? A lot of the regulations and public health information so far have only been provided in the English language while the information that has been provided in Irish is incorrect and completely insufficient. I want to see a very comprehensive campaign in Irish rolled out at the exact same time as the campaign in English. Irish is the first language of our country and it is only right and proper that people's language rights are respected in that regard.

I understand that the vaccination schedule is a moveable feast because the Government is not fully aware of the supplies that will be available but people need to be given as much certainty as possible. I know that the Minister of State will endeavour to give that certainty.

The Minister of State referred to the independently devised vaccination strategy which was approved by NPHE and then by the Government. While the strategy is outside of the political sphere and it is not open to people to lobby to change it, priority should really be given to people in category 9, that is to say, people aged 18 to 65 who are living or working in overcrowded settings. My colleague, Senator Flynn, spoke this morning about the difficulties facing the Traveller community right across Ireland at the moment. Priority should be given to these vulnerable communities, who are living in dire conditions without electricity or running water and who already suffer from health inequalities. Extra support should be granted to them. I am sure Senator Flynn will talk about that but I just wanted to relay my support and that of the Fianna Fáil group on that issue. Senator Flynn spoke about isolation facilities that should be made available for people who are doing their absolute utmost to stay safe and stay away from this deadly virus. In countries such as Canada, communities like the First Nations peoples were prioritised and similar prioritisation should be given here.

The Minister of State is doing an awful lot of work around the clock in the Department of Health. It is perhaps the busiest Department and the busiest period it has ever had. We completely support what is being done with the vaccine roll-out; it just needs to be clearly communicated. I wish the Minister of State the best of luck over the coming months.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House today to represent the Minister for Health at this important debate. The HSE is being over-stretched in the responsibilities that have been placed on it by the Government. It is responsible for the general healthcare of the public as well as testing and tracing and now it is responsible for the roll-out of the vaccine. There should be a single person reporting directly to the Taoiseach who is responsible for the roll-out of the vaccine and that person should have the Taoiseach's authority to cut through any red tape or any blockages that may be in the system in order to get the vaccine out as fast as possible.

With respect to the vaccine, why is the Government not giving the numbers? Every evening on RTÉ we get the bad news at 6 o'clock. It has become a feature in all the households with which I am engaged that at 6 o'clock every evening they wonder what the numbers will be that evening. Would it not be great to hear that we rolled out 1,000 vaccines today, or that we had 1,000 infections but rolled out 2,000 vaccines? Would that not be an important PR message to get out there for the Government? More important, it would give hope to the people who are depending on these vaccines. Once the vaccines were approved, a sort of euphoria ran through society and people thought it was great because there was a vaccine on the way and they were covered. They thought it was great stuff and that we would all be able to get back to normal. That was until they looked at the ready reckoner that was put on the Internet some time ago. I looked at it and if someone is 40 years of age and healthy, he or she is not likely to be vaccinated until some time between November 2021 and May 2022. We need to make people aware that this is a slow and extremely arduous programme to roll out. Not only that, we must make them aware that the manufacturers themselves can run into problems as it goes along. The Government has to be honest with people and say that AstraZeneca or others may run into production difficulties and if they do, it is going to set back our programme. People need to be aware of that and comfortable with it.

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I cannot for the life of me understand why we are not rolling out antigen testing. It is being rolled out in every school in Austria and in other European countries. For some reason, we seem to have a mental block when it comes to antigen testing, which would give a test result in 30 minutes. It would put us in a situation where we could open our schools, retail and restaurants by testing staff at the point of entry every morning. I am no medic but from the little knowledge I have, I understand that an antigen test will give a result within 30 minutes and that it is particularly good where there is a heavy infection. There have been some moves recently to do that.

We had a discussion this morning about the leaving certificate, which should be postponed. It should be scrapped this year. We should either set the year back or put ourselves in a situation where we will deal with the same system as we had in 2020. This is a matter that is of concern to me.

We have a two-stage roll-out of the vaccine on the island of Ireland. Northern Ireland is being rolled out in one particular way and the Republic is being rolled out in a different way.

The issue of quarantine has come up. I heard the Minister for Justice saying on Sunday that we are not going to control the Border and that she did not intend to discuss it any further. We controlled the Border for foot and mouth disease in 2001 to protect sheep and cattle. We cannot cull humans so surely to God we should control the Border. The problem with controlling the Border is that countless Governments have disinvested in the Defence Forces and in the Garda presence on the Border, with the result that we would have great difficulty in doing it, but we should do it in co-operation with the PSNI in Northern Ireland, where people crossing from this side over would also be stopped. If we cannot get agreement with the Northern Executive on an exactly similar system, a facsimile of both sides, we must seal the Border and allow our vaccination programme to go ahead independent of what is going on elsewhere in the world. I ask the Minister of State - it may be unfair to do so - to set out precisely what has been discussed that is stopping the control of the Border.

On the original plan for the roll-out of the vaccine, nobody would deny those who are in long-term care facilities and who are 65 years of age or over from having the vaccine. I would like to know how far we are with that process and how many nursing homes are left in the country that need to have the vaccine. I have no difficulty with that at all.

The title of front-line healthcare workers is a title which is fraught with all sorts of argument. Who is on the front line? I had surgery two weeks ago in hospital and I have to say that the staff and front-line people who looked after me were marvellous. I was tested on the way in, while I was in there, and on the way out. It was fantastic. Everyone will agree that people working in medical institutions should be administered the vaccine. We want to open schools, however. I do not want to be told today that children do not transmit the Covid-19 infection or that they are not susceptible to it. My three-year-old granddaughter tested positive for Covid-19 and locked us all up for a fortnight. If she can test positive, at just three years of age, any child can. From that point of view, we should be looking after our teachers. They are as important a part of front-line work in this country as the hospitals are if we want to get our children back into the schools.

The same point applies to the Defence Forces and the Garda Síochána. I compliment the Garda. Every day over the weekend where I live close to the Dublin Mountains there were Garda checkpoints all over the place turning people back. These personnel were doing the job

that they are being asked to do by the Government. They should have been vaccinated by now in order to protect them.

The policy in respect of 65- to 69-year-olds with medical conditions is seriously flawed. I am also thinking of the children over 16 years of age with cystic fibrosis or who have suffered with cancer and whose immune system is seriously threatened. Why have we not included them in one of the top levels of the roll-out so that they would be protected from the earliest possible date?

When we talk about key workers, for me - and I do not know how my colleagues feel about this - the key worker is the young lady or man who is sitting at the cash register in Dunnes Stores and the bus driver who is met every day by the few people who have to travel to work. I have tremendous respect for Professor MacCraith but at the end of the day we have to go back to look at who the real key workers are.

There are many other things I would like to say. Where the vaccine is concerned, I ask the anti-vaxxers to get off my back. I do not want to hear from them. If I need to, I will have my vaccine given to me out on the plinth in full public view. These clowns are causing serious problems, particularly for elderly people who are wondering whether they are right and whether there is something wrong with the vaccines.

I congratulate the Minister of State on the good job the Government is doing, but we need to ramp up PR in this regard.

Senator Martin Conway: I welcome the Minister of State to the House on this important issue. I agree with my colleague, Senator Clifford-Lee, about the Irish language. To add to that, the information should also be available in Braille so that the blind community has full access to it. I do not doubt that the Minister of State will send this message to the officials to ensure that happens.

There have been many discussions on vaccines down the years. It is correct to say that, in this country, many lives have been saved by vaccines. Outside of clean water, a vaccine is the single best medical intervention we can make to keep our population safe and healthy. The Covid-19 vaccine will do exactly that.

When the virus became a reality this time last year, it was in my parish that some of the first cases of Covid-19 in Ireland were discovered. Since then, it has been an incredibly difficult journey for everyone. Families that have lost loved ones are grieving, but they have not been able to grieve in the traditional and appropriate way. People who have got sick with Covid, some with long-term Covid, have had an horrendous time. People who have lost their jobs and are now in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, because of the disease have also been through an horrendous time.

The good news is that the vaccination programme has started and vaccines are being rolled out. Of course it will be difficult and there will be challenges along the way. We are a small country, but we are fortunate to be part of the EU. The European Medicines Agency, EMA, will give a green light to the AstraZeneca vaccine when it is correct to do so and when the agency can stand over it. There will be no rushing into this. It will be done with the safety and health of the citizens of Europe in mind. I have no time for the vaccine nationalisation and anti-Europe talk that seems to be taking place. Were it not for Europe, we would not have the purchasing power to get the vaccines we have already received and those we will receive. Talk of going it

alone at this time is unhelpful.

We have a task force that is responsible for the roll-out of the vaccination programme. I have every confidence that the prioritisation list it has devised is correct and has the best interests of public health in mind. It is not helpful for politicians to lobby for one sector over another. We all know the unique roles and commitment of the various front-line workers, from those working at checkouts to those working in Covid wards. I have confidence that the national immunisation task force has done the best it can with the medical expertise and advice available to it to get the prioritisation correct.

We are disappointed to hear about a reduction in the supply of the AstraZeneca vaccine. I understand there are high-level discussions under way between AstraZeneca and the European Commission. I do not doubt that our best interests, just like Europe's, will be served by the Commission and that we will resolve the problem. This will not be the first problem we have with the vaccine. To that degree, I believe communication is critical. We need to have as much communication and information available as is possible. It may not be possible to give a daily update on the number of people vaccinated, but if it were possible then it would certainly be helpful.

I agree with Senator Craughwell that anti-vaxxers have done an injustice to the vaccination programmes in this country over the years, and they continue to do so. I look to the other side and the great work being done by so many people promoting vaccines. I think of the late Laura Brennan from County Clare and the heroic work she did before she died to promote the taking of vaccines. In her memory, and in the memory of all the other people we have lost, we have a duty to get out there and sell and promote the vaccine.

I have no doubt the commitment is there to deliver the clarity that I have called for in terms of the provision of information. I do not necessarily think that anything will be achieved by having a specific Minister with responsibility for the vaccine. The vaccine is the number one priority for the Government at this stage. The little bumps that we have experienced along the way, particularly in terms of what happened in the Coombe and the Rotunda, were regrettable but significant lessons have been learned from them.

Perhaps the Minister of State does not have the answer to this, but she may come back to me at a later stage. I would like to know the logic behind not permitting pharmacists to vaccinate the over-70s when it comes to the Covid-19 vaccine. They have been providing the flu jab for years. What is the rationale or reasoning behind not allowing pharmacists to inject the over-70s? Speaking of pharmacists, I think the actions of a former colleague of this House, Kate O'Connell, were commendable. She was on national radio on Sunday saying she did not necessarily believe that pharmacists should get the vaccine quicker than other people in the medical sphere. She outlined her reasons and reasoning for that. It was a very selfless contribution, and a very logical and mature contribution.

What we need with this vaccine roll-out is clear communication and cool heads. If we all did our level best to promote it among our family, friends, neighbours, communities and, in our case, our constituents, eventually we would turn the corner and have much brighter days ahead. The sooner the better, but we can only go at the pace the vaccine becomes available to us because at our end there cannot be, and I know there will not be, any delays.

Senator Annie Hoey: I thank the Cathaoirleach. I thank the Minister for coming into the

House to talk about this issue. We are all talking about the same things and thinking about how AstraZeneca is going to impact on us. It is important, as was outlined, that the Government needs to turn its attention to the plan it has for our own vaccination programme. I know that the existence of the vaccine has provided an enormous amount of comfort and certainty for many people. This is at a time when an awful lot of things have occurred outside of our control. Right now, the public needs certainty and reassurance that our national vaccination programme will continue at pace.

The Minister of State did outline a bit of news on AstraZeneca and how this is going to affect the national vaccination programme. Does she envisage any major delays in the roll-out? Are there contingency plans in place to acquire the vaccine from other sources, such as Pfizer-BioNTech, to make up for the lag in numbers? When people heard that news, a shock and a jolt was felt. People are looking to the Government for comfort and certainty, to know that there is a plan B and that things will not spiral completely out of control.

In opposition, we like to blame the Government for many things, but I do not think we will hold it responsible for something that has happened at a European level. What people want to see from the Government is how it will respond to what has happened at a European level with AstraZeneca and the potential reduction in the number of vaccines rolling out. That is within the Government's responsibility, as is the communication for same.

On the roll-out of the vaccine here at home, I want to raise concerns about the pace of the roll-out for some healthcare workers. I listened at the weekend to Phil Ní Sheaghda of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, on RTÉ. She raised most concerning issues about nurses and healthcare assistants in some hospitals being told they would not be likely to receive vaccinations until mid-February. At the same time, they do not have access to enough PPE in some settings. I am sure I am not alone, even in this Chamber, in being concerned that healthcare providers on wards, who are bravely facing this virus every day, are still waiting for vaccination or indeed a date for vaccination. For goodness sake, we are still in January and mid-February seems quite a while away for people who are dealing with Covid patients in healthcare settings, especially given the high infection rate in hospital settings. The idea that it might take another three weeks for a nurse in a hospital setting to get a vaccine is unacceptable. Does the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, have any response to that? Will she explain why we could be halfway through February before a nurse might receive the first dose of the vaccine? Does this have anything to do with the potential shortages coming down the line? What contingency plans are being put in place for those nurses and front-line workers who have been told they will have a longer wait?

I was at a meeting last night with a group of women and we inevitably got around to discussing the virus and vaccines. It was interesting to hear that many of the women in the group, some of whom were more than 60 years of age, said they would rather stay cocooning at home for a while longer to ensure that front-line workers got the vaccine. I am not saying that is reflective of all people of that age group, but I thought it was interesting that they would not object to sitting tight for another couple of weeks, as their priority is for healthcare workers to be vaccinated. Perhaps they know healthcare workers or they see the value of their work. I thought it was interesting that they were so selfless that they wanted healthcare workers to be safe, well and vaccinated.

I am pleased the Minister of State spoke about an information campaign. Last night at the meeting, we talked a lot about communication and information. I think people know that

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there is no real rhyme or reason to this virus, that there are things that are simply out of the Government's control, my control and everyone else's control, but there is a need to believe the Minister of State and her colleagues have things in hand, insofar as that is possible. That belief will come from clear, honest communication and from people feeling they trust that there is leadership in steering us through what has been an extraordinary situation. None of us thought the pandemic would go on for this long and I do not think any of us thought we would see something like this in our lifetime.

We also need clear and honest information about the reality of the virus, actions that the Government is taking and the safety of the vaccines. I do not want to give the conspiracy people any airtime. They have more than enough of it in my inbox, in my direct messages and online, but it is a challenge for all of us to go up against this misinformation campaign, which seems to be spreading. I have been surprised to hear people I know say they have been sent information by friends while playing Words with Friends - who knew it? - about this crazy thing that is happening. I was astonished that this information is being sent around to people who would have been lining up to get vaccines and talking about vaccinating their children for everything else except for this virus. It is interesting how the misinformation has got around. It is incumbent on the Government and all of us not only to challenge this misinformation but also to simply shut down some of the nonsense that is hurtling around the place and clogging up the inbox of everyone else in this Chamber as well.

I want to discuss the need to make sure that the arrival of the vaccine and its roll-out are bolstered and not countered by the public health advice of the day. The vaccine's arrival is not a silver bullet and for as long as we have a plan to roll it out, we must also still have a plan to manage community infection. No one wanted the surge in infection rates that we saw in December 2020, which has led us to facing two or even three more months of complete national lockdown. It could have been avoided had we all decided to keep the country under tighter restrictions in December.

I do not want to go too much into accusations on people coming into and going out of the country. At last week's meeting of the Joint Committee on Health, when discussing mandatory quarantines, Dr. Ronan Glynn said that no one thing is a panacea to dealing with this virus, but that does not mean we cannot take a combination of all sorts of things and hope that, with a strategic patchwork of actions, we can try to eradicate this virus insofar as possible. We cannot make the same mistake again. The big challenge is to learn from what has happened in recent months to try to steer us to the end point where it is hoped we will all have the vaccine.

We need a firm commitment from Government to do everything we can to reduce the spread of the virus through further and tougher restrictions, including the introduction of mandatory quarantine for those travelling into Ireland. I know that the subcommittee met yesterday and recommended that quarantine be introduced for anyone travelling without a negative PCR test. That does not take into account that someone could have contracted Covid following on from that result. I am somewhat sceptical about the negative PCR test for allowing somebody to travel.

The Labour Party calls for the introduction of mandatory quarantine and a ban on all non-essential travel into Ireland. It is never too late to begin introducing measures to reduce the spread of this virus and it is never too late to start saving lives. A number of measures could help on our way towards the full availability of the vaccine.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: We face an emergency. Covid-19 is rampant in the country and could get worse if we do not act now. Our health, economy and social lives are suffering immensely. We have had more fatalities from Covid in less than a year than we had in the dreadful times of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The people have made enormous sacrifices.

I regret to say that if we are to be objective about it, the current strategy is not working effectively. What can be done? A number of experts in Ireland and beyond have called for a zero Covid strategy. I encourage the Government to consider adopting such an approach. The Independent Scientific Advocacy Group has many respected academics and other persons involved, including Dr. Tomás Ryan, who was very impressive on television last night, Dr. Julien Mercille and Professor Anthony Staines. At the very least it is worth consideration.

The Independent Scientific Advocacy Group will point out that a zero Covid strategy is simply doing what is possible to suppress this virus towards elimination. Despite what the name might imply, it is not a utopian goal of perfection; it is an unfortunate name. The group's viewpoint has been labelled as being unrealistic. It is realistic but it has not been realised because of the reality that the Government will not give this proper and due consideration.

I am a Senator from a Government party which not only tolerates but encourages diverse opinions. We should put them all on the table and explore them fully. We should not be afraid of them and should test them forensically. What is the harm in failure? We get knocked down; we get up again; you're never going to keep us down. It is worth consideration. I hope the Government will give it detailed discussion and countenance that as a possibility.

In the world today, there are two types of countries: those that have beaten Covid; and those still struggling with Covid. The good thing is that all those that have beaten Covid have all done essentially the same thing. They have pursued a strategy of aggressive suppression, which is what a zero Covid approach entails. We need only to copy what has been done successfully elsewhere.

In terms of key interventions that can be made by the Government, it boils down to three which must be executed with discipline. First, we need a lockdown to end all lockdowns. This will bring massive rewards for our people. The current restrictions will drive the case numbers to a level manageable by our contact tracing teams. Let me be clear, everyone hates lockdowns, but they lead to huge rewards and allow us to start living again soon. With discipline and an effective lockdown, we can go back to pubs, sports, socialising, singing, shopping, hugging and everything else.

As a former schoolteacher, I am particularly concerned for the mental wellness of young people. They have been deprived of interaction in our schools. They have also been deprived of sport, which is an essential platform and outlet for young people. They have held the line to date. I pray they will continue to do that. They need to know there is light at the end of the tunnel, even if it involves short-term pain to achieve long-term gain. We hope that the young people will continue to play the brilliant role they have played to date. Schools reopening is very important. We can debate at what specific level of cases they can reopen, but it must be a low level. This is also dependent on the school type and the area where it is located. Again, a lot depends on community involvement.

Second, there is no point driving down case numbers if we allow travel to reseed the country with more infections. To a certain extent, this is what happened in the summer, although I am

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not placing all of the blame in this area. I do think this has been overhyped by some people, but it is undoubtedly a contributing factor. Had the situation been managed properly, we were two weeks from zero Covid at that point. A few international travellers at that time formed part of the cocktail that reseeded the virus in the country and it then grew exponentially. We all know where we are now. We need mandatory hotel quarantine and border checkpoints and management. The virus knows no boundaries, be they borders between counties or jurisdictions. We need proper management. There is no question that these actions, if done well, will bring sufficient results.

The countries that have controlled Covid insist on some form of tight quarantine for travel. There is no other way around it. If we choose to pursue a zero Covid strategy, east-west is key to it because the parties in the Six Counties cannot agree on this. I know the issue should not be politicised, but an east-west approach and two islands working together on implementation of a zero Covid strategy would provide us all with incredible freedom, liberation and protection. In regard to the Border region, we manage it in the same way as we would manage any other county. Where there are high case numbers, they must be contained. We follow the science and the data. There is nothing political about it, we need only follow the data. We already have a border management plan and a restriction around travel beyond a 5 km radius. The Independent Scientific Advocacy Group plans show us how red zones and buffer zones can be used to relax the 5 km radius limit in the country.

Third, we must invest in public health. Test, trace and isolate is vital. After a few weeks of lockdown, case numbers will be down to a manageable level. At that point our testing and tracing infrastructure will be key to keeping it that way. The problem is that Ireland has underinvested in its public health infrastructure and staff.

I implore the Government to consider these actions. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, who I know is very open-minded, does not need to make any decision today. I commend the Government. I am not having a go at it. Government members are doing their level best, day and night. The Seanad as the Upper House has a famous tradition of allowing for different viewpoints, which we can ventilate in the Chamber while testing and challenging ourselves. I hope the Minister of State will take my points on board and bring them back to the Government. I will do the same as I do in the parliamentary party, An Comhaontas Glas, so at least people can be assured that it was absolutely fully considered and explored. To date, however, I do not believe it has been given the full forensic examination and the realistic appraisal, critique and approach it deserves.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. Tréaslaím leis an méid a bhí le rá ag an Seanadóir Clifford-Lee agus Conway i dtaca le straitéis chumarsáide trí mheán na Gaeilge agus trí mheán Braille chomh maith.

I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, and welcome her to the House for this very important debate and statements. I will make a few points at the start before I get to the substantive part of my remarks. I am sure it will be unsurprising to Senator Craughwell that I disagree with him on this. I do not quite understand the psychology, the politics or even the effectiveness of suggesting boots on the Border to deal with this. I do not believe that is helpful. I believe it is inflammatory and it causes worry and concern in an already uncertain time for people. We need to work to give practical effect to the memorandum of understanding that was agreed between both chief medical officers in what seems a lifetime ago. I do not say this to be political, glib, cliched or lazy about this. It is not political because it is science and we need to work on

the basis that Ireland is one epidemiological unit. We all share this big lump of rock. That is the reality.

When I travelled down here before Christmas, as people crossed the Border towards the Carrickdale Hotel, they were asked to divert off and there was a Garda checkpoint, which was no big deal. It was right and proper. This was replicated throughout this State and in the North. That is how we deal with this. We have spent years talking about the fact that no one wanted a return to a hard border and that the Border could not be policed. Nobody knows better than my colleagues from Border constituencies that it would be an absolute waste of time and resources, including An Garda Síochána and other resources, to put them on particular roads. I am aware this is not what Senator Martin had suggested in his remarks, but I do not believe it to be helpful, in the first instance for that very reason and because I do not believe there is any point in arguing for that.

We need not to operate in silos and our health departments need not to turn their faces away from each other. We need to be sure in our information and we need to co-ordinate cohesive all-Ireland communication strategies that speak to and reassure people, and which give fact to what are meant to be our shared plans for dealing with the emergency we face collectively, no matter where we are. This is where our focus should be if we talk about a North-South response to the pandemic and not reactionary reflex towards putting people on the Border.

I put it to the Minister of State that the people are facing into what is, potentially, the worst phase of the pandemic so far. Case numbers are in their thousands compared with a few months ago. The State now has the fastest growing crisis in the world and the Government still has not got testing and tracing right. Testing and tracing was not used effectively to hunt down the virus. There is still no enforcement of mandatory quarantine for people who come into the State. The all-Ireland response to fighting the virus is still not right.

I mention this bleak lead-in to this debate about the roll-out of the vaccine to ensure the Government approaches its inoculation plans with much more rigour and certitude than it has in its handling of the transmission of the virus. There was a huge sigh of relief across the State when the respective states began the vaccination programmes. People are keen to be vaccinated and keen to play their part in eliminating this virus and not just living with it. The Government needs to seize this moment of popular expectation and hope that has arrived with the vaccine. Yet, the early signs are not good that the Government and its numerous systems are match ready, to borrow a phrase, for the challenge and opportunity offered by the inoculation plan for the Government and the people. The Government must harness the resources that the State has and incorporate them into the vaccination plans. As it rolls out the plans it should work in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Executive's plans, as I have said, and both administrations must be joined at the hip, so to speak, to protect and vaccinate the people of this country, no matter where they happen to reside.

The more people are vaccinated, the safer hospitals become on wards and in intensive care units. The more people are vaccinated, the safer the rest of the population is as they await their jab. There is a caveat and just because a person has been vaccinated, it does not mean he or she cannot transmit it. When people get the vaccine, they should still be careful around those who do not have it.

It is crucial that the Government instils confidence in the public as it follows through its mass vaccination programme. That confidence will come from information that reflects the

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Government being on top of that plan. A lack of information from the Government in this most important of projects will create a vacuum, and into this vacuum will step misinformation and rumour, some of it deliberate, as colleagues have said.

I do not doubt for a minute that this is a massive undertaking, the biggest in the history of this State. What are the Government's key objectives and what is its pathway to achieving these objectives? Trained people are essential to the success of the programme and the Government has correctly set an ambitious target of 700,000 people to be vaccinated by the end of March. How did the Government arrive at that figure? Set against that figure is the information that the Minister has given us today about reductions and delays in the delivery of some of the vaccines, with some parties not able to meet their delivery commitments. If there is a shortfall in numbers or serum - and that seems to be the case - is the Government in a position to speedily ensure nobody will miss out on being vaccinated in a safe and timely manner? Does it have the personnel trained to achieve this target? Does it have the required dosage of serum to meet the March target and the information technology system in place to register and record vaccinations or to ultimately guide this unprecedented operation? Has it identified the mass vaccination centres yet and what about the staff and expertise needed to run these centres?

There is also a concern about the accuracy of the designation of people to be vaccinated from those most vulnerable to those most needed to protect the most vulnerable in residential care homes, in wards and intensive care units in hospitals and in childcare centres, pharmacies and GP surgeries. Is the Government satisfied the vaccination programme it is overseeing is capable of successfully covering all the various categories of people? Colleagues have told me that elected representatives are understandably being lobbied about the timeline of the vaccination programme, and when they write to the relevant Minister seeking answers and reassurance for constituents, there is an unacceptable delay in the response.

I appreciate and understand that this is a busy time but elected representatives, regardless of their level, need to be responded to. They need the information, as we have all said, to assist in having a proper communications strategy. People are genuinely worried that the speed of the Government's vaccination programme is too slow. It is fair to say there has been a collective effort from the Members of the Oireachtas to support the Government in its plans to deal with the consequences of the virus for people on many fronts. The Government must listen, respond and change its strategy when necessary. We want to see the virus extinguished and not just contained. The measures taken by the Government across the board, particularly in the roll-out of the vaccination plan, will be judged on whether we are moving towards extinction or containment.

There has been a reduction in Seanad sittings for understandable reasons so the Minister of State might indulge me while I have her. On the Order of Business we referred to the upsurge in domestic violence as people are isolating at home. There is a scheme that I want to flag where people in pharmacy outlets can quietly seek assistance by asking trained staff, who will in turn provide those people with the ability to contact the Garda. That initiative has been rolled out in pharmacies here in the South for some months and Boots in the North has recently announced an "Ask for ANI" initiative. If somebody asks a member of staff for this, that person will be brought to a private space where the police can be contacted. At this point we need to look at building on that initiative and encouraging more pharmacies and other trusted places to roll out similar programmes so that people can find engagement.

I have written to the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister for Health,

Deputy Stephen Donnelly, on the issue and I am not trying to catch the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, who is present, on the hop. Rather, I just wish to reaffirm that ask.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Given the gravity of the issue, I indulged Senator Ó Donnghaile. I call Senator Flynn.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. It is remarkable and a positive good news story that a vaccine is being rolled out. I am delighted. I did not imagine that only a few short months after becoming a Member of the Seanad I would be able to speak on the roll-out of a vaccine. I very much welcome that it is being rolled out. I welcome the significant amount of work that has been done to date with regard to long-term residents and front-line healthcare. There are several long-term residences in County Donegal, such as St. Shanaghan House. The youngest person in that facility is in their mid-50s, while the oldest resident is in her 90s. They share a corridor and the laundry room. It is very tough for older people and others to self-isolate and cocoon. If they get a few minutes to speak to one another, many of them will do so even though it is against the advice of the management. When we speak about care residents, we need to keep older people who are long-term residents in mind as well.

3 o'clock

Although I welcome the roll-out of the vaccine, I wish to raise an issue relating to special needs assistants, SNAs. I used to be an SNA and I know the level of work that comes with the job, such as bringing children to the toilet, washing their hands and working with very vulnerable children and children with behavioural issues. One cannot practise social distancing while working as an SNA. I recommend that SNAs be moved into the category of care workers. Although SNAs stated last year that they are not care workers and we cannot expect them to be care workers, they do a lot of care work in their job and they help young and vulnerable children and children with special needs to reach their full potential in school. I do not think there is a single person in this House who would stand up and tell me that I am wrong and that they are not essential workers.

Teachers are key workers. Every child in this State has the right to an education. At present, the unions and the Department are discussing issues around teachers being vaccinated. I believe teachers should be moved up to the category of key workers. In that way, we would not be taking people out of categories but, rather, adding teachers and SNAs into those categories. All that is doing is valuing the work that SNAs and teachers do with children. We must remember that teachers and SNAs are not robots. Many of them have young children or loved ones at home who may be at risk. The sooner we get young children with additional needs back to school, the better. One way of doing that is to put teachers and SNAs further up the list for vaccination.

The Seanad Civil Engagement Group, of which I am a member, yesterday discussed the issue of developing countries. Although the vaccine is being rolled out here in Ireland, we need to be seen internationally to support developing countries. Senators are aware that Ireland has provided funding to the World Health Organization in respect of the COVAX initiative but I and my colleagues in the Civil Engagement Group hope that we can do more as a nation.

As many other Senators stated, when we talk about vaccines, we automatically think about them in a negative context, such as chicken pox, tuberculosis, polio and other serious illnesses that had significant impacts in the past. That is especially so for members of the Traveller community. Last night, a young Traveller man asked me whether the Traveller community will be

used as guinea pigs in the vaccination programme. That actually makes me very sad because the Traveller community has been treated so badly by the State for many years. I know we are moving in a positive direction in terms of equality for the Traveller community. This young man told me he believes that members of the Traveller community are to be used as guinea pigs for the vaccination process. He believes that because of the misleading information that is circulating. Vulnerable groups take in this kind of information. I do not have to tell the Minister of State that Facebook, Twitter, etc. are all making billions of dollars a year in facilitating anti-vaccine promoters. We can get ahead of this situation with good advertising and Government investment in positive communications, especially for young people, those who are older and people from vulnerable communities.

Earlier, as Senator Clifford-Lee pointed out, I spoke about outbreaks of Covid-19 in halting sites and working-class areas, as well as in the migrant and homeless communities. Regarding the roll-out of the vaccine, I am sure the Minister of State has heard of the organisation Safetynet Primary Care. Last Wednesday, representatives of the organisation came out to a halting site in Ballyfermot and were able to kill two birds with the one stone. It was brilliant to have that service from Safetynet Primary Care, and its representatives were able to swab people to test for Covid-19 infections and give people a jab at the same time for hepatitis A. We must invest in these services provided by organisations such as Safetynet Primary Care to roll out the vaccine in the disadvantaged, migrant, homeless and Traveller communities.

One of my colleagues, Senator Ruane, works closely with Safetynet Primary Care and I know how vital that organisation is to marginalised communities. I also think, however, that we need political will and good, positive energy supporting this roll-out of the vaccine. We must get everybody involved, and this vaccination process is so important that we must start it at a community level and work from there. I have seen first-hand the type of work carried out and the services provided by the organisations I have referred to. They had built up relationships with people from marginalised communities even before the pandemic. We must value their work. The Department should invest in Safetynet Primary Care to enable the roll-out of the vaccine in all communities as soon as possible. That is one way of doing this.

Another point to note is that some areas do not have GPs. There is much we will need to discuss in the days ahead. I will not have enough time to discuss everything today, but one aspect is that some areas do not have a GP and people may have to go outside of their town to seek medical advice from a GP. When we talk about the roll-out of the vaccine, we must of course ensure that it is an equal process and that every person from every community will have an equal chance of getting vaccinated. We must also, before it grows any bigger, break down all the nonsense on social media from those who are anti-vaccination.

Senator Eugene Murphy: It is important that we all pay tribute to the HSE, as we have done, and to the task force, the Covid-19 vaccination people and their teams. However, I want to spare a thought for people such as the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. I say that because I am sure it is not easy going to bed at night with this burden on their shoulders and then getting up the next morning not knowing what situation they will face. That is particularly the case for people who have responsibility as a Minister.

We must all have unity of purpose here, and, in general, I am glad to see that is prevailing. I state that because, ultimately, we will only be able to vaccinate people according to the amount of vaccine we get.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin): Hear, hear.

Senator Eugene Murphy: That is the reality. People sometimes ask when they can have their vaccinations. I get that question every day, and several times a day, as does the Minister of State. Most Irish people have been fantastic. However, one or two people, whom I know have not been following the regulations, to be blunt about it, have asked me when they will get their vaccinations. I simply ask them when they are going to wash their hands, keep their distance and do what they are supposed to do. That is 50% of this debate and it is very important. A minority of people have been responsible for the pandemic getting out of control.

Why in the name of God, when we have a 5 km limit on travel, do we have four or five flights per week coming from the Canary Islands? These are not people from the Canary Islands coming to holiday in Ireland but Irish people, some of whom will ask me when they can be vaccinated. At the same time, overburdened nurses, doctors and helpers in our hospitals, some of whom work double shifts to help their friends, are holding the hands of relatives and friends dying from Covid. I stress again that it is a minority who are involved, as the Minister of State knows, but it is treachery by some of our fellow citizens. No matter what any politician, health expert or government does, it will all be in vain if we cannot get our people, even if it is a minority, to follow what we have been asked to do by the medical experts. For all of my life, my view has been that I am not in a position to challenge a medical expert. As much as 99.9% of what people like Dr. Holohan and others have told us has been right. We might not like to admit it but they have been very accurate all along. Again, I beg the small minority who are at this behaviour to stop and to follow the rules.

The carry-on of AstraZeneca has been extraordinary considering that it received more than €60 million from the European Union to proceed with its vaccine. The company is now telling us it will have to reduce by 60% the number of vaccines it provides to Europe, yet it will supply vaccines to other countries. That demands answers. I applaud Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, for challenging the company because it needs to answer questions. I hope there are no dirty tricks or trickery going on with this British-Swedish company. I would like to say more but I will not do so. AstraZeneca has serious questions to answer. If, in good faith, it takes an advance order from Ireland or any other country in Europe and then suddenly says it cannot honour it, having received taxpayers' money from EU member states to develop the vaccine, it must be challenged and give answers without delay.

When Ireland faces such challenges, it is sometimes hard for the Government to deliver on its promises. However, I am optimistic for the future as I believe more vaccines will come on stream and we will get rid of the virus. I am sure we will all be delighted and thrilled when that happens, although that is a number of months away. When we get rid of the virus we will look back and say it was tough, hard and challenging but we have done it.

I have two short questions for the Minister of State, which she may have clarified already. When will people in residential care homes be vaccinated? When will young adults who attend special needs centres be vaccinated? If she cannot give me the answers today, I ask her to revert to me.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I welcome the Minister of State. I thank all healthcare staff for their work on the front line on behalf of all our citizens. These staff work long hours in difficult circumstances and have made huge sacrifices in their private lives to ensure they are in a position to continue to look after those in need.

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I welcome that by Sunday last, 143,000 people had received the vaccine, all of our nursing homes had completed the first series of vaccinations and we had started on the second dose in those homes. This will be a comfort to families who have loved ones in those homes and who have been unable to visit them. It is important to note that we cannot let our guard down with regard to the simple message of washing our hands, wearing our face masks and keeping our distance, as both the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines protect at 94% and 95%, respectively.

Will I take the vaccine when my turn comes? I will, and I advise everybody to do so. However, I am concerned that a recent MRBI poll for the Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association, IPHA, showed that 75% of the respondents said they would take the vaccine, 18% are unsure and 7% said they will not. We must ensure we get close to 100%, if possible, to save lives, help our healthcare system and get back to some form of normality. I agree with Senator Flynn about a comprehensive campaign across all social media platforms to dismiss the myth being put forward by the anti-vaxxers. It is also important that Moderna laboratory studies have shown that its vaccine is protective against the new UK and South African variants.

I welcome the provision of the timeline for vaccinations which has been proposed by NPHET, subsequent to receiving our doses based on EU agreements. It is important that it is adhered to when rolled out through GPs and pharmacies in the coming months. There have been reports of office staff receiving the vaccination ahead of front-line healthcare workers, family members and so forth. This cannot happen. People must have confidence in our programme. I do not believe that we, as politicians, should seek to adjust the timeline, but I wish to make a few points.

I am personally very annoyed with the decision by Fórsa which meant that the special needs schools and classes have not reopened. I am aware this is a priority for the Ministers of State, Deputies Rabbitte and Madigan. We do not want children, whether they are in special needs schools or mainstream school classes, to be out of school for a moment longer than necessary. Many people support the policy that schools should not reopen while numbers are high, and I understand the concerns of special needs assistants, SNAs, about social distancing while in class. However, we have a responsibility to the children and their parents, because these children are regressing and are in danger of losing previously developed skills. Many of these children might never regain what they have lost. We must recognise the strain that the closures have placed each day on the families, guardians and carers of children with additional needs. Have we chosen to prioritise the needs of those who are vocal and strong over those of the most vulnerable in our community? Should we consider a vaccination programme for SNAs of children with special needs? Whatever needs to be done to reopen special classes must be done.

I wrote previously to the Minister for Health to request that he ensure that Covid-19 vaccines are made a priority for the principal carers of elderly people and people with medical needs. Over the past month I have been contacted by several families who are angry and frustrated that vaccines are not being made a priority for carers who are looking after elderly parents or persons with medical needs. Even though these carers work in the home, they should still be viewed as front-line healthcare workers because their work of giving full-time care to loved ones is vital. When services were shut down family carers continued to care around the clock to ensure their loved ones stayed safe at home and out of hospital. These carers are terrified that they could get Covid-19 and transmit it to their vulnerable family members, because who will mind those family members if their principal carers get sick? While some family carers will fall into the categories outlined for priority due to age or their own health conditions, many will

not. Family carers and home helps cannot be allowed to be forgotten.

I will conclude with a simple message and one we must continue to reiterate. For people to stay safe they must wash their hands, wear a mask and keep their distance.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. The Minister of State has heard many important contributions. I will start with some words of appreciation to all the front-line workers who are working so hard in our healthcare services and, in particular, all the people who are working hard to get people vaccinated as soon as possible. We very much appreciate their efforts.

I wish to draw the Minister of State's attention to a particular category of people. I am hearing concerns that, with the best will in the world, a significant number of elderly or vulnerable people could fall through the cracks without anybody meaning it to happen. I refer to the almost 7,000 members of religious orders in Ireland. Not many people would know that many elderly people in religious life are living in groups in congregated settings which are not HIQA-regulated settings and may or may not come under the Nursing Homes Ireland umbrella. I heard from one such group recently in a case involving what is effectively a care home being run with 24 elderly persons, with an average age of well over 80, within a campus of 65 people with an average age of 80. They are not, however, on the HIQA-regulated list. They do not want to jump any queue. They would like to know whether they will be forgotten. They should be in the same category as regulated nursing homes. In that context, I drew the Minister's attention to the matter, and I know they have written to the Minister. I also know that the Association of Leaders of Missionary and Religious in Ireland, AMRI, has written to the head of the vaccination task force and to the relevant authorities to draw attention to the fact that there are thousands of religious, many of whom are elderly at this stage, as we all know, and many of whom have underlying conditions, and the need to be aware of them. Certainly, at the time of the Covid outbreak there was a lack of awareness about the situation of religious who were not in regular nursing homes. We saw what happened with nursing homes earlier last year when people did not move fast enough and did not have the knowledge, the stitch in time that saves nine. I am drawing the Minister of State's attention to the fact that there may be at least one institution, and there are probably several, that would qualify as residential nursing homes but which are not HIQA-regulated. We are also talking about a situation in which there might be a wing of a convent, let us say, where there might be six or seven religious. There might be somebody coming in from Sodexo or some other care provider, multi-skilled people providing everything from nutrition to sensitive personal care.

I have two questions on two issues. Is it clear that people who are working, if one likes, as private healthcare providers, going from one place to another, are in the front line? Are they on the high tier? That is the first issue. The Minister was not terribly clear about that in the House last week. As for the situation of the religious, can something be done to make sure that people do not fall between the cracks because they are not in accommodation that is on the list of HIQA-regulated nursing homes? I will happily supply details of at least one such setting but I know there may be more. I would argue that where perhaps three or more people over 65 are gathered, where there may be underlying healthcare conditions, but even if there are not, and where there are a sufficiently large number of people gathered, it would make sense to vaccinate early. That is especially the case if there are carers coming in from an organisation or individual carers moving from one setting to another. I am really anxious that attention be given to this. I know they have written the letters, but so far there has not been the reassurance. I stress that they do not want to jump any queue; they just want to make sure they take their place with oth-

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ers in their category who, because they are in HIQA-regulated settings, have already been vaccinated. A date is of tremendous consolation to people. They are not saying they have to have the vaccination tomorrow, but people would be tremendously reassured if they could be given a message that we know about them and they will not be overlooked or fall down the list of tiers and they will get a vaccination probably by a certain date. That message is of tremendous importance to a person who is elderly or vulnerable, and that side of the operation needs to be minded.

I wanted to put that to the Minister of State. As I said, people are not looking for special treatment. They are actually very self-conscious these days, given the climate they are in, in that they would not want to be seen to look for special treatment. It is very important, however, that people do not fall through the cracks simply because they did not come within the bureaucratic definition, for want of a better phrase. I would be very grateful if the Minister of State could either respond to this concern today or take it away and get a Government response to me and to the Seanad as early as possible.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for coming before the House. I commend her on her work on trying to ensure that adult respite services remain open during this difficult period and also that day care services for children with special needs are open. I agree with the sentiments Senator Flynn expressed. It is important that we ensure that provision is made for those children and their families. I worry about the levels of regression that are happening. We must make sure that they remain a priority. I also agree with Senator Flynn on our approach to overseas aid. It is important that vaccines are made available in the developing world and are not seen as the preserve of the wealthy western world.

I echo the comments of Senator Clifford-Lee on the Irish language and the comments of Senator Conway on braille. I have asked on a number of occasions that information campaigns be conducted in other languages. I am thinking in particular of Polish and Portuguese for a variety of reasons. It is essential, given the multicultural nature of our society now, where English or Irish is not somebody's first language, that we have information campaigns available in more than one language.

The EU strategy has been correct. We need more European co-operation in the health area. If we did not have European co-operation, countries would fight against each other to get a supply of vaccines. I welcome the fact that President von der Leyen is holding AstraZeneca to account. It has to deliver on the contract that was provided.

I had the wonderful experience of an anti-vaccine protest outside my office in Gorey before Christmas. We need to take further action. I look forward to dealing with this in the context of the online safety Bill, which we will consider quite soon. As part of that, measures can be taken against disinformation concerning vaccine and health products. This is something that will be important.

We also need to take stronger action against some of those who continue to break the 5 km rule and do not travel for reasons of work, study or emergency, including some anti-vaccine protesters. I have a lot of time for gardaí and the difficulties they have faced. It is important that the House acknowledge Garda Alan Lebligue who had to stand up to some of those protesters. It is important that we note his very sad passing and extend our sympathies to his husband and gardaí. These are some of the challenges that gardaí are forced to face.

For the majority of people in this country who follow the rules and try their best, it is very difficult to see a small minority who do not follow the rules. In my community in Gorey there was a funeral last night where over 50 people attended and did not care about social distancing. Gardaí tried to do their best, but a small minority do not believe that the rules apply to them. It is important for the overwhelming majority of people in this country that the rules apply to all. We need to send out a message to those who are anti-vaccine that their behaviour will no longer be tolerated. Senator Hoey talked about communications issues. I agree with the comments. One of the challenges has been consistency in messaging and the roll-out of policy between different hospital groups. I want to specifically refer to concerns I have about the roll-out of mental health services. There is evidence that while public health nurses are receiving the vaccine as part of the process, public mental health nurses are not. This has been the case in the south east. I have raised the matter with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, who I know has raised it with the HSE. I refer to St. John's in Enniscorthy which has a geriatric building. All the staff and patients in that building received vaccinations, but not all the staff and patients in the psychiatric building beside it did. We have to ensure that those who are engaged in mental health and public mental health services are treated fairly.

A debate needs to be had on a post-vaccine context. The question of vaccine certification, in particular travel in the future, is something that requires an EU-wide response. The Government needs to start to plan for that. We also have to examine how we recover from this period in terms of rebuilding communities and continuing with our message of hope. Everyone wants the vaccine programme to do well and to contribute in a positive way. I ask that the Minister works with all sides of the House to ensure that this can happen.

Senator John McGahon: Over Christmas I took a strong interest in vaccines, the history of vaccines and everything else. Let us consider smallpox, a disease that has ravaged mankind for millennia. We can go back as far as the death of Ramesses V, who died in 1,145 B.C. When his mummy was exhumed in the 1970s the experts could see evidence of smallpox lesions on the mummified corpse. They identified him as being one of the first historical figures to have suffered from smallpox. Let us fast forward many centuries to 1795 and Edward Jenner. The British physician was one of the first people to discover vaccinia. He used the cowpox virus to inoculate against the disease. Thus, the word “vaccines” entered the English language and dictionary. Much of the work Edward Jenner did at the turn of that century led to the great strides we made in the 20th century to combat smallpox, leading to its eradication. The moral of my story, and the point I am raising, is that vaccines save lives and work.

Let us fast forward to the 1970s in Ireland. At that time, close to our home, many family members told stories of people dying from polio or tuberculosis. Many of the survivors who did not take vaccines were left with permanent damage, including brain damage, deafness and blindness. In 1985, 10,000 children were diagnosed with measles in Ireland. We then embarked on an ambitious vaccination programme and by 1987, only three years later, the figure fell from 10,000 to 205. As I said, vaccination works.

What really stops vaccination and hinders it is misinformation. Last night, there was almost a meltdown on Irish Twitter because of misinformation. Misinformation was put out to the effect that the new AstraZeneca vaccine would only have an 8% efficacy rate for those over 65 years. The only reference to 8% in the report in question was a comment that 8% of people studied were between the ages of 56 and 69 years. That is the only place where a figure of 8% was referenced.

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There is great responsibility on the Minister of State, members of the Government and Members of the House to ensure the information we put out to the public is correct. The same goes for the media. There is a serious responsibility on those in the media. Some in the media have far bigger social media platforms than all of us in the Chamber would have put together. I am looking around and I mean no offence by that. These people have a responsibility to ensure the information they are putting out is correct.

There is a tendency to want to be the first person to tweet or get breaking news out and to be the first person to see that tweet or news. Mark Twain said a lie gets around the world seven times before the truth even has the chance to lace up its boots. I wish to put that point on the record. It is important for people throughout Irish society who have a platform to ensure the information they are putting out is correct.

I was looking at WhatsApp groups last night involving different friends with no interest in politics. Straight away, they commented on what others said about the vaccine and this and that. Regardless of whether we like it, what people see online is what they believe much of the time. This happens no matter how many times we say that people should take what they see online with a pinch of salt. It is simply what many people take as gospel.

My third point relates to vaccine scepticism and what we see on Facebook. I am keen to discuss this topic further, although it does not much relate to the point. Let us consider Facebook and the powerful algorithms the company uses. If I go looking for vaccine scepticism and ask whether vaccines do something to me, I get directed to a Facebook group with perhaps 1,000 people who are talking about the dangers of vaccines. It is all hogwash. Then the platform takes me down a rabbit hole. Since I am searching for these topics, Facebook and its algorithms put something else about vaccines in front of me and then something else again and so on. A person can go down a rabbit hole of conspiracy theories and misinformation and total BS, for want of a better term.

We have to hold social media companies to account. They cannot continue to undermine public health advice. No matter how much they say they are taking action, using their services responsibly or trying to delete material and tackle misinformation, it is not enough because misinformation is being allowed to spread like wildfire. The World Health Organization has been clear that vaccines save lives and misinformation costs lives. We must not allow misinformation to thrive online, whether through Facebook companies or journalists with a large social media following who want to get a tweet out first. They may realise they were completely wrong and were had or taken for a walk up the park with the information referenced. It is incumbent on all of us in Irish society to ensure key information about vaccines is available. People should take their information from those who have spent their lives devoted to the study of vaccines and not from what they see online.

Senator Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. There are a number of items I want to bring up with her. Some of my colleagues have already asked about them but from my own experience and from the representations I have received, I would like to put them to her today as well.

We need the promised data on the roll-out of the vaccination programme on a daily basis, as has been mentioned. It is simply not good enough that we must rely on tweets from the Minister for Health to get this information. I am sure that like all other Members in this House I receive a daily briefing by email on Covid figures which unfortunately, as we all know, has included a

large increase in deaths over the last couple of weeks. Therefore, it is very important that these figures are balanced with ones of hope. In fairness, our only hope at this time is to vaccinate as many of our citizens as we can in the quickest possible time. I am sure we are all very familiar with the evening announcement of the Covid figures that occupy conversations in every home. I honestly believe those conversations need to include more hope and more light at the end of the tunnel. Vaccination figures would give us all a lift each day as we would know that that light is getting closer.

I learned from the RTÉ news yesterday that the EU is seeking that 70% of all adults be vaccinated by the summer. I join other Members of the House in asking the Minister of State what effect, if any, the delays with the delivery of the AstraZeneca vaccine will have on us in Ireland. In a tweet a number of days ago the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, said it was a real setback but I would appreciate an update from the Minister of State today. Again, notwithstanding what she said in her comprehensive introduction and what other Members have asked her already, while driving to the House this morning I listened to Mr. Seán Moynihan, the chief executive of ALONE, who was speaking on my local radio station KFM. He outlined many of the concerns I have been receiving from older persons and their families regarding when they will receive the vaccination. Important in this information is also the question of who will let the older population know it is their turn to be vaccinated. Will it be their GP or will that information come from the HSE? Will it be a phone call or a letter? This information is all the more important considering the unbelievable scam that our older population in particular are facing now. Those carrying out this scam need to be brought to justice straight away. I have seen the very professional way they are contacting our most vulnerable and seeking their most private information from them. It is important that the Minister and the Minister of State clarify the procedure on how these citizens will be contacted and the approximate time for that contact. I ask the Minister of State to make people aware of that scam, which is ongoing. Others have raised it but it is something that has been very professional, from what I have seen. It has been mentioned by so many.

Like so many Members today, I want to pay tribute to our front-line workers and welcome the fact that so many have received their first vaccination. It was great to see those same front-line workers share vaccination pictures on social media and for that to be welcomed by so many in our community. However, we are all aware of those healthcare workers who, as has been mentioned, have not received the vaccination and I join with others in asking the Minister of State to give us an update on that position.

I have received a number of phone calls from those living in sheltered housing and their families. They were suggesting and indeed asking that they be vaccinated at the same time as the residents of the nursing homes and hospitals to which their homes are adjoined. It seemed to be a practical solution but unfortunately this did not happen. I wrote to the HSE on this matter and would appreciate if the Government considers vaccinating those living in those sheltered homes in the quickest possible time. They live on the grounds adjacent to facilities whose residents have had the vaccination and I would appreciate it if that could be considered.

I would also like the Minister of State to consider those on dialysis for the vaccine and indeed carers as well, as has been mentioned. Like other Members, I appreciate that the roll-out must be premised on health grounds and on the basis of those affected most, but it is very important that we as public representatives relay the large number of representations we are getting from various sectors of society.

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I too believe that there should be a dedicated person in Government in charge of the vaccine roll-out. I tell the Minister of State that it is not too late to consider this. There have already been two important issues that have needed such a person. This is the most important issue for this State in many generations. So much is depending on it and as I stated about the leaving certificate families this morning, the entire country is waiting on every word from the Minister about this roll-out.

The tourism industry is, as we all know, on its knees. It welcomed the announcement from the Minister that the majority of the adult population will be vaccinated by the end of the summer. This announcement needs urgent intervention by Government. The good news of the vaccine has us all discussing holidays later in the year. I ask the Government to assist the tourism industry now as it needs to tap into those discussions and ensure that the Irish market is the holiday of choice this year.

I will finish by thanking gardaí, as others have already, who are on the front line and protecting us from those who simply should know better. The Garda continues to protect us all. I also want to put on record my thanks to the Defence Forces who, once again, have come to the fore at this time of national crisis. They can always be relied upon. Let us ensure that this good news is promoted at every opportunity. Our country needs this programme and its roll-out as quickly as possible. I wish the Minister of State every success is getting us all vaccinated.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. It is an unenviable task to try to co-ordinate the logistics and roll out a vaccination programme with multiple vaccines in such a short time. It is quite a feat of human engineering to be able to bring these vaccines to the market in such a short time and to have them transported across the globe to vaccinate people as quickly as possible. We should not underestimate that logistical task. It is important that the effectiveness of the programme is not compromised in any way when we bring speed into the process. There should be no mistakes along the way. We must keep a track of everyone who has received the vaccine and the only way we can do that is to have proper systems and processes in place to do it. We will pay the price down the line if things are not done steadily and properly from the outset.

There are a couple of issues that I wish to raise and that have come to me through representations from various groupings. It is welcome that so many different groups are lobbying to get bumped up the list, for want of a better phrase, because the fear was that there would be a massive anti-vaccination campaign, people would be too afraid to take the vaccine and we would not reach the crucial 70% vaccination target in the country. That fear is gone now because people want this vaccine as quickly as they can get it. I am certainly in that category, although, rightly, much further down the line than many others. I am here to advocate for some of those others today.

We need to ensure that there is confidence throughout the vaccine programme. We have only started this process so there is a long way to go yet, but to ensure that confidence, we must underpin the programme with transparency and fairness. Those two things are key. People need to know what is happening and why, every step of the way. They need to know where the vaccines are coming from, how they will get here, why there is a delay if there is one, why they are going where they are going, and the rationale behind those decisions. People need to be fully informed every step of the way.

Fairness must underpin the vaccine programme, and there have been some deficiencies in

that regard since the programme began. We have to give a little bit of leeway there because the programme had only just started, was still bedding in and the guidelines were still filtering across the system. We have to give people the benefit of the doubt that those mishaps at the beginning will not happen again. I am referring to the instances where those who were not on the priority list were vaccinated ahead of those who should have got the vaccine first. A number of facilities were involved in that, some of which made the media while others did not. My understanding is that those who were not top of the list were getting in ahead of others in a number of facilities and that should not happen. I hope that is the end of it.

We are going down the line of vaccinating based on age and I question that, not to be difficult but because we have to have these conversations. Age is just a number and is an arbitrary way of assessing the need for a vaccine. A 70-year-old might be in the best of health and would run rings around somebody in their 40s. Somebody in their 30s or 40s may have cystic fibrosis or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, COPD, and may be immunosuppressed or on a transplant list. Such individuals are in greater need than the 70-year-old I mentioned. Some of them have been cocooning since March 2020 because the risk to their life is greater than the risk to somebody who is older but perfectly healthy. The easy option is to choose to roll out a vaccine programme simply based on age. I ask the Minister of State to have that conversation with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. There is no harm in doing things differently. We can change direction on this. There is nothing wrong with putting one's hands up and saying that, having had time to assess this, we think there is a better way to tweak the programme to make it more effective and work better for our citizens. I ask for that to be considered.

I spoke earlier today to a woman in her late 30s with a six-year-old child. She had a kidney transplant 23 years ago and is already doing better than her doctors ever thought she would when she had the transplant. She is immunosuppressed and has been on drugs since the day she got that transplant. She has not left her house or seen anybody, bar her husband and her child, for ten months. Her parents came to see her in her garden at Christmas. We all had a little bit of respite over the last ten months. We got a break at Christmas and got to see more people. That did not happen for those who are immunosuppressed because of the fear of catching Covid. The mortality rate for people in that category is between 20% and 25% as opposed to less than 1% for the rest of us. That is the general rate. I am not aware of everyone's medical history. I am assuming that, for the most part, we are all perfectly healthy. This person's biggest fear was that her child, who was going to school, might bring the virus home. Her husband has not seen his elderly mother or had a cup of tea with her for ten months because he will not go into anybody else's house for fear that he might bring the virus home to his wife. That woman should not be waiting for the vaccine. She needs it more than somebody in his or her 80s who is quite healthy and who has no underlying conditions.

Although I am out of time, I will make two more very brief points. The first relates to the vaccine companies. The Minister needs to talk to the Taoiseach and the Cabinet. We need answers as to why the vaccine companies have not met their contractual obligations to deliver the amount of vaccine they signed up to deliver. The citizens of this country need an answer to that question.

Finally, while we are rightly very focused on our surroundings, our country and our people, let us not forget the world's poorest populations and the poorest countries in the world. They are not getting the same access to the vaccine that we are getting. We have a moral and ethical obligation as a First World country to lead and to ensure that people in the world's poorest countries have the same access to the vaccine as we do. Let us not rely on the drug companies

to do that job; we must do it ourselves.

Senator John Cummins: I thank the Minister of State for coming here this afternoon for this very important debate on the Covid-19 vaccine programme. Like many other Senators, I put on record my appreciation for our front-line workers across the health system, particularly those who have taken up roles as vaccinators over the last month and who have worked many additional hours over weekends and, in many cases, extended their shifts. We now have an initial team of 1,700 vaccinators in place and more than 4,800 people have completed the training programme. That so many are mobilised and ready to vaccinate as supplies come on stream is a testament to the work of the Minister of State's Department and the HSE.

The effectiveness of these vaccinators is, however, limited by the supply of vaccines they receive. I was concerned by the 50% reduction in the supply of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which obviously had an impact. I saw that impact in my own county of Waterford as University Hospital Waterford was unable to vaccinate over the last ten days. We should be thankful that vaccinations in the hospital resumed today as the Pfizer vaccine is once again in circulation.

As other Senators have mentioned, serious questions need to be answered by AstraZeneca. Yesterday, I heard the EU's health Commissioner state that the answers the company has given thus far are unsatisfactory. I concur with that. We need to find out whether the company has provided the vaccine not only to the UK but to many other countries in breach of its contractual obligations to the European Union, as has been widely suggested. We need clarification on that urgently. I know that Ursula von der Leyen is also trying to get to the bottom of the matter.

As other Senators have mentioned, there is an urgent need for a dashboard relating to the vaccine roll-out programme. This could be tacked on to the existing Covid-19 app which, incidentally, utilises technology developed by a Waterford company. As vaccines come into the country, it is important for people to see when and where they are being distributed and how many are being administered every day. That is doable and it should be done without delay. It is important that we present those data to give the public confidence. Confidence feeds into tackling misinformation and the spread of misinformation.

Before Christmas I was horrified to come home from Dublin and find a glossy A4 leaflet, of which I have a copy here. That misinformation was not spread in the way my colleague, Senator McGahon, spoke of so eloquently, that is, on social media. This was the traditional form of the leaflet in the door and I understand it was distributed widely across Waterford city. It links Covid-19 to 5G, says nanochips will be implanted in people and that face masks are unsafe. While I dismissed these things as crazy, I am conscious that there are people who probably read this nonsense and believed it. There is an onus on us as a Government, on every politician, the media and anyone who has access to a social media platform to call out this nonsense for what it is when they see it. We all have people in our own network, maybe people we were in school with when growing up, who have bought into these conspiracy theories. We have seen how quickly they can spread right across our social media platforms and we need to up our game in targeting misinformation.

The utopian view that zero Covid is possible is misleading when one considers the back door that is Northern Ireland. We need to be very careful about what we wish for as regards mandatory quarantine for everybody coming into this country. While we might be lucky to have all our family here in Ireland, there are many hundreds of thousands in this country who have family abroad and so we need to be very careful. People will say in six months that this

was not what they asked for. I ask the Minister of State to be careful in this consideration, and I know she is doing so, because we cannot just jump and say in one fell swoop that it is possible to solve everything.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I have enjoyed this whole conversation and thank everyone who participated in it. It was a very meaningful debate. I have taken some notes and will deal with them before I read my script.

One issue about which I am very passionate is SNAs and children with special needs, as well as special schools and special classes. A number of contributors spoke on that matter. Senator Flynn suggested that perhaps SNAs should be considered carers. Believe it or not, while SNAs are under the same union, when working in adult disability services they come under health and care but when working in education they come under education. In adult disability day services they are back and working and are seen as essential front-line workers during level 5. That is a clear thing and it is important for people to know that adult day services are open thanks to the huge work of the providers and families but, most important, the staff who are going out day in, day out, and supporting our vulnerable adults. Senator Flynn is hitting a very clear point on something that is an issue at this moment in time.

Misinformation is an important matter to address and Senators Cummins, Byrne and many others brought it up. There is an onus on all of us as public representatives to be confident enough in our beliefs to be able to speak back to this and speak out about it. Senator McGahon explained the history of vaccination, back to the very beginning, which proves it works. Misinformation is ongoing on social media, as well as through the traditional approach of coming in the letterbox. I have heard it and could not believe the story of the chip going into one's hand where we are all being tagged. This is absolutely shocking but, as pointed out by Senator Flynn, there is a vulnerability as well in our society where people are listening to news about Covid-19 all of the time. When a different voice is heard, people wonder if there are some merits or truth in it. One would not normally expect vulnerable people to be led in this way. We need to be confident about the whole vaccination issue. It is here for a reason and the whole world wants it. We are very fortunate to be part of the EU where a schedule of vaccines has been put in place for us. At the same time, it is important that people understand why we need it and that it is safe at this time.

We should call out the social media. As I listened to the debate, I wondered if social media platforms allow issues to run so that the Government will have to come in and pay to boost or sell the other side of the story. At this stage, the social media companies themselves should be running such a campaign. There is a big sporting event taking place in the United States next weekend - the Super Bowl or something like that. Rather than being sponsored as normal by a drinks company, which I will not name, on this occasion it is sponsoring the idea that one should take one's vaccine. That is the right way for us to go. I call on companies like Facebook and Twitter to get involved in a little sponsorship. The Government and public representatives are doing this, but maybe these companies should take the lead by providing sponsorship in support of the roll-out of vaccines. That is all I have to say on fake news.

Senator Craughwell asked a question on nursing homes, all but four of which have now had their residents vaccinated. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, clarified that to me yesterday evening. The strategy is agile in its approach but we must have a framework to start with. These are priority groups 1, 2 and 3 and this leads on to the question of how many vaccinations will happen and where. The Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, has always stated that through

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priority groups 1, 2 and 3, we would have 700,000 people vaccinated by the end of March. What is the composition of those 700,000 people? To start with, and without being morbid, we have to look back at where our greatest losses took place. To be very honest, the greatest losses occurred in the congregated settings of the nursing home environment where staff were on the front line. That is where we had the greatest loss of life. We will, of course, deal with our nursing homes and congregated settings. They make up a portion of this group. Our front-line healthcare staff of 150,000 people and the 500,000 people aged 70 years and over comprise priority groups 1, 2 and 3.

The target that was set out for the end of March was based on having a supply line, or sight of line, of vaccines. This was based in the beginning on having our first two vaccines and then our third vaccine. We have to deal in facts at all times. Between the two vaccines that we had sight of line of in the beginning - in the first three weeks - we had 45,000 vaccines. They require two jabs. We have now used them to deliver 148,000 vaccinations. We are now back to the start again because we have to give the second dose of the vaccine. That is as open, clear and transparent as we can be, as nobody is hiding vaccines. We know what we have contracted to get in. One of the silver bullets, of course, was the third vaccine, which people would know as the Oxford vaccine. This was due to come on stream. We were expected to have sight of line of that. It was supposed to feed into the roll-out of the vaccine to the rest of our front-line healthcare workers, to those over the age of 85 and to those between the ages of 70 and 85. That was to bring us to the end of March.

From the end of March, 1.7 million people, across 12 different priority groups, were to be vaccinated in one go. Senator Chambers spoke about different advocacy groups. Of course, the people with the most serious underlying conditions would have to be at the head of that group, along with carers, who were raised by Senator Carrigy, and the home care assistants who are going into homes.

However, home care assistants do not fall into priority group 1, 2 or 3. It is important for people to know that if someone is a carer and over 70 years of age, he or she is in priority group 1, 2 or 3.

I take Senator Mullen's comments on board and will bring them to my colleagues, the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who has responsibility for older people. I do not like to assume anything, but I assume that the people in question being over 70 years of age means they would fall into priority group 1, 2 or 3.

I will ask the Acting Chairperson for a smidgin of leeway. To my Green Party colleague in government, we will differ on certain points. While I appreciate the flow and openness within the Seanad, all of us in the Government, of which his party is a member, like to stay on the one ship so that mixed messages do not go out to the general public. All of our
4 o'clock colleagues in government are together on this point. In fact, it should be non-political and we should be delivering the one message on getting the vaccine and ensuring our healthcare workers, front-line staff and so on are covered in priority groups 1, 2 and 3. We must allow that to happen in the interests of everyone's safety. As the Acting Chairperson mentioned, the pressure we are getting, including via email, from people asking whether they can get vaccinated now is unbelievable. However, we must stick to the strategy even while Professor MacCraith, the Minister and the team in the Department of Health remain agile in their approach, which is continuously changing.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Eugene Murphy): I commend the Minister of State on her response.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Thank you.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Eugene Murphy): First, she is persuasive.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I was going anyway.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Eugene Murphy): Second, this is an important issue and I am sure Senators did not mind.

Sitting suspended at 4.02 p.m. and resumed at 4.19 p.m.

Report of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation: Statements (Resumed)

An Cathaoirleach: I have here copies of the entire report. I thank the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, for bringing them over to us today for the debate. This is a copy for Senator Boyhan. From what I have read of the 2,865 pages of the report, like many Members of this House I have been disturbed and dismayed by the contents. The prevailing sense within the pages, as the Minister and colleagues are aware, in these first-hand accounts, is of the fear, cruelty, silence and horror suffered in these institutions.

I wish to mention briefly Sheila O’Byrne, of whom the Minister is aware, and the many conversations I have had with her. Many colleagues would have met Sheila O’Byrne. She stood outside the gate of Leinster House in all sorts of weather looking for the truth and for people to take responsibility for what happened to her and many voiceless thousands of others. The report is an important step, but it is by no means the end. It is not the end of the suffering for Sheila O’Byrne and many thousands of others who were in those institutions, and it must not be the end of the actions required to right the grievous wrongs.

I will hand the Chair over to Senator Boyhan for the remainder of the debate. Last week, he said it was a privilege and an honour to be one of the little voices that in some way represents the people that he grew up with in one of those institutions. I assure him that his is not a little voice as he presides over the Chamber. As we discuss this report, we are all reminded of the very real people and the very real stories contained within it. I ask Senator Boyhan to take the Chair.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): Thank you, a Chathaoirligh, for inviting me to chair this session. I really appreciate that gesture. It is a kind one and it is one I am greatly honoured to take. I am conscious that we need to keep a tight timeframe on what we are doing. To date, 14 people have indicated to speak for six minutes each. One does not need to be a mathematician to know that 14 multiplied by six equals 84. The Minister has at least ten minutes to speak and it is important that we hear him and afford him the time that is necessary. It is important for Members to stick rigidly to the six minutes to allow as many people as possible to participate in this very important debate. I will stick to the list that I have. If there is

any change, the group that I call may indicate that change to me. The first speaker is Senator Chambers, Deputy Leader of the House and leader of the Fianna Fáil group.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I thank Senator Boyhan. It is very apt that he is the Chair this evening. It shows the seriousness of the issue and the fact that it is real people and real testimonies that are at the heart of this report. I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. It is good that he is here to listen to the contribution of Senators. This is really only the beginning of the healing process. I am not sure that a State apology, a commission of investigation or even a redress scheme could ever adequately compensate or repair the hurt, harm and damage that the State and its institutions and the church inflicted upon the women and children of this country for so many years. It is right and proper that every horrible detail is laid bare for us to know about, hear about and to remember, lest we ever forget, that a very short time ago, the way that we treated women and children was nothing short of cruel and inhumane. As a State we were complicit in what was effectively mass human trafficking, social engineering and the harmful and cruel treatment of unmarried mothers because they were somehow lesser than everybody else in society.

I acknowledge that while a lot of work went into this report, the feedback on the report from the survivors and their families has not been positive. Questions remain to be answered by the commissioners themselves over some of the language. I do not think the Minister is in a position to answer the questions that we might have about certain phraseology used in the report. I refer to the statement that there was no evidence that children were harmed in these institutions. That is an obscene statement and one that is nothing but insulting to the survivors of those homes. Direct testimony is evidence. People recounting their direct experience is evidence. Are we looking for CCTV footage? Are we looking for photographic evidence? Who are the commissioners to decide that the evidence is not there? Were they so long in the bubble of doing this report that they became desensitised and cold to the experience of the people that lived through this experience?

Questions must be asked about the accounts that some survivors gave that were not properly accounted for in the investigation. I refer to questions that were apparently put to survivors that were never put to them. We cannot simply brush over those things. There is now an onus on the Government and the State to address those questions properly. I reiterate my call that the commissioners involved in preparing this report should take questions from survivors, the public and the media. They are not in isolation. They are publicly known now; we know who they are. They were paid well for their work. They were given ample time to complete their work. I do not think the State received from them the level of workmanship that would have been expected on that report.

I move on to the contents of the report. I wish to discuss those mothers and babies who may not be covered in this report. I refer in particular to my county, Mayo. In the early 1900s mothers and babies were cared for in the county homes. In the 1920s the county home in Castlebar was home, if one can call it that, to women and children who were cast aside by their families and by society. I have since read that they were actually referred to in the Poor Law Commission as “inmates” in the county home. They were to be separated from other inmates who were referred to - those who were poor, sick and infirm. Discussions then ensued in the county home in the 1920s and 1930s as to where these inmates could be moved to that would not be a significant burden on ratepayers so that they would not have to pay too much to cover the cost of looking after them.

It was actually suggested that they could be housed in derelict buildings. In the end it was decided to ship them off to the mother and baby home in Tuam. Women and children from Mayo who passed through the mother and baby home in Tuam are probably in that burial site. I was glad to see Galway County Council unreservedly apologise for its role as the governing local authority at the time for what happened in that facility. Equally Mayo County Council needs to do the same. Simply because it managed to ship them off to a different county does not absolve it of its responsibility in this regard. Certainly, questions remain to be answered. I know there is a burial site where the county home is. It is not marked, and we do not know what is there. There is a history there. Mayo's history is like that of any other county. Over the years many women were removed from their communities and families and put into these facilities. They were made to work for little or no remuneration and had their children taken from them. They were mistreated every minute they were there.

This report is a start, but it needs to be re-examined. I support the call for an independent review of the report. At the end of the day the lesson is that we must listen to survivors and their families. It is their views that matter, not ours. One of us saying that the report is good and fine does not cut it. If they are not happy with it, we need to redo it. I make a plea to the Minister that the redress scheme we put in place not be caught up in red tape and that people not be made to jump through hoops to access the compensation that is rightly theirs. It needs to be made as easy as possible to come through that scheme. Every effort must be made to facilitate people and we should not compound the hurt anymore. While no redress scheme or apology will ever fully heal the hurt that is there, let us not cause any more harm now when we know what we need to do to make this right.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): Before we proceed, while I do not want to stymie debate, we need to be conscious if we are in any way challenging the professionalism of people who are not in the House. As they are absent, they do not have recourse to defend themselves and make their case. I ask Members to be conscious of that in their contributions.

I call Senator Martin Conway.

Senator Martin Conway: Like others I acknowledge your presence in the Chair today, which is most appropriate. I acknowledge that you have spoken regularly on many other issues, but this one in particular. You have a particular insight, which has enormously benefited the discourse. I commend you on that.

I welcome the Minister to the House. Nobody could question his sincerity in trying to right the wrongs of yesteryear and there were significant wrongs. The State oversaw a cruel and barbaric treatment of women, girls and children in institutions that were funded and largely run by the religious orders. The State was supposed to be the guardian of the citizens of this country but, unfortunately, it allowed the church to do this. This happened because, to a large extent, the church and State were interwoven. Essentially, one was in the pocket of the other. Politicians who should have spoken out were afraid to do so because of the consequences speaking out would lead to.

The report is good but it is incomplete. In addition, the language used in the report is overly legalistic and lacks a certain compassion. Words do matter. There are many words in this report that lack any sensitivity or compassion. I agree with others who said that the authors of the report should have held a press conference. There is precedent for this. It happened in respect of other reports. I recall that when the McAleese report was published, Martin McAleese held

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a press conference and took questions on it. Even at this late stage, the Minister should use his good offices to prevail upon the authors to make a public statement and take questions from the media. In this day and age, it is the least we would expect of them.

We need to right the many wrongs that were committed as best we can. The apology by An Taoiseach in the Dáil on behalf of the Irish people was welcome. The apology by the Tánaiste and leader of Fine Gael, Deputy Varadkar, on behalf of the party that I represent was appropriate as well. Fine Gael was in government at times when this was happening. The Tánaiste's apology was appropriate because Fine Gael was complicit in that it did nothing to address the situation. That is inexcusable, but the apology is welcome.

What people are interested in is what happens now and in the future. The politicians of this generation are not responsible for what was done by politicians in previous generations. They are also not responsible for what future politicians might do, but they are responsible for what is done now. This situation must be dealt with now. It needs to be dealt with, not in the medium-term future or in the long-term future, but in the short-term future. There are 22 recommendations in the report which the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, discussed with the survivors on the webinar. Those 22 key recommendations need to be implemented without delay.

There is no excuse for straightforward measures not to be taken immediately. For instance, the issuing of medical cards and the resolution of the housing issues can be done in a matter of weeks, not months. In regard to the legislation that is required, most people agree that the back end of this year is not acceptable; it is too late. One of the most fundamental issues as far as I am concerned is former residents of mother and baby homes being able to identify who they are. They must have access to their records and their entitlements. It is no longer good enough to use the Constitution, GDPR or any other modern day excuse as a reason for hiding or not making these records available. If it comes down to it, I would err on the side of the person seeking to identify his or her parents as opposed to the side of the parents and protecting their identities. If it comes down to it I believe that the person who was adopted has the right to know who he or she is. We are not talking about people knocking on a door. Protocols and procedures can be put in place but I believe this is very important.

I know I am out of time in this debate. Redress needs to be dealt with as a matter of urgency. The Bon Secours, for example, had the mother and baby home in Tuam. They are one of the biggest and wealthiest healthcare providers in the State. Having a collection is not enough; we must have significant engagement.

I am sure we will revisit this topic many times but I commit to the Minister that I will raise this on the Order of Business each month from now on, looking for updates on where we are in implementing the report's recommendations.

Senator Marie Sherlock: It is very fitting that Senator Boyhan is the Acting Chairperson today. The Senator's contribution to the House last week was a very important one.

I welcome the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman. Much has already been said about the report. From my perspective it is hard to put into words the sense of horror and shame reading some of the women's testimonies and the report of the confidential committee. Reflected in the body of the report was that women were treated worse than animals. Many of the women had zero idea of what was happening to their bodies. There was no information. There was no understanding as to how babies were made or born. This was even before the women were dealt with the

worst psychological cruelties during the births of their babies and afterwards. Many of us who are fortunate to have been willingly pregnant and who have given birth will know the anxieties and the distress of giving birth, but many of us did it in an environment of love, support and encouragement, even during the pandemic. That contrasts so starkly with the experiences of thousands of women in the State during the years covered by this report.

We cannot turn back the clock. The traumas inflicted on women and the children who are now adults cannot be undone. The Government can, however, use all of its might and main to do all it can to make sure we do the right thing by survivors.

I will touch on three things, the first being remedying the commission's findings, especially the parts that have caused most hurt, and in particular that women were not forced into these homes. Unfortunately, the commission appears to take a very legalistic view. Perhaps women were not bundled into the back of a car but the women had no other option. This is repeated in the report time and again.

Second, we need to make sure the Government ensures access to all records, including birth certificates, church records and administrative files. The commission talks about how little information is contained in some of these files but when a person has nothing, a little information is everything. We have had so many people contacting us with just a fake birth certificate. At least allowing access to all of the information that is available is very important.

Most important, we need to get right the system of redress. We need the Government to reject and amend recommendation No. 27 whereby: "The Commission considers that women who entered Mother and Baby Homes after 1973 do not have a case for financial redress." This is astounding and arbitrary. It ignores the social and economic context of the time. It is black and white. I believe that all Members in this Chamber would acknowledge that we need to move away from the black and white time that is described so vividly in the report, hopefully to a time now where everybody needs to be considered. Everyone who had experience in those homes had very different experiences. In considering that recommendation, a question needs to be asked of the commission and of the Government. Do we really believe that in 1973, when the then Minister, the late Frank Cluskey, introduced the unmarried mother's allowance, it was meant to be the magic wand with which we could wave goodbye to a previous era and women would, all of a sudden, be emancipated and be able to forge a life for themselves and their babies? It was a significant development but it was just the first step. The thousands of teenagers and young mothers who gave birth after finding themselves pregnant in the 1970s and 1980s had no choice but to go into the home. We have seen that with the statistics in the body of the report. It states 30% of babies born out of wedlock to unmarried mothers in 1973 were born in mother and baby homes. That figure did not drop dramatically; it was a steady decline until 1991.

Women had no options and there was State-sanctioned censure of babies born out of wedlock. The awful status of "illegitimate" was only lifted in 1986. We need to change the recommendation. I urge the Government and the Minister to consider the report of Dr. Anthony McCashin, produced in 1993 for the ESRI and dependent on data from the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s, relating to women on the unmarried mother's allowance. It describes poverty, with 35% of those women living below the poverty line, and a minimal earnings disregard within the allowance. There was no offset for any childcare and these women faced discrimination in the labour market. Women in receipt of the unmarried mother's allowance did not have great options. It was a support but it was certainly not the be all and end all.

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I am up against the clock but this report calls for a central repository of records from institutions and adoption societies. This report will not bring closure to the era and in some ways we hope it is the start of people beginning to be able to get more information on their past. I urge the Government to commit to a dedicated archive and locate it on Sean McDermott Street. There are fantastic proposals for the site and it would be very fitting for the Government to provide financial support and for the Department to have the central repository located there.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I welcome the fact that Senator Victor Boyhan is the Acting Chairperson for this debate. His contribution on the mother and baby homes last week was certainly one that I took on board and was upsetting to all, including the Senator. I acknowledge it this afternoon.

Naturally, this is the first time I have spoken to this matter in Seanad Éireann and I begin by stating my full agreement with the Taoiseach's apology. The State failed these mothers and babies and we must confront that difficult truth rather than turn away from the failings of the State. I am fairly familiar with the information and I am struck by the words of mothers who recalled being treated as second-class citizens and being shunned by society. I find it hard to comprehend that 15% of all children under the care of these institutions - over 9,000 children - died. It is a deeply disturbing fact that shames both the church and the State.

As outlined by other Senators and public representatives, we cannot change the past and the horrific wrongs that women and children suffered but we must certainly ensure that the response to this report can have a real and positive impact. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the current position. I welcome the commitment of the Taoiseach to back up the report and the apology given by the State. It is essential that these actions take place in the short to medium term. It is equally essential that the voice of the survivors is central to these actions, as the Taoiseach committed to ensuring. The inaction and injustice of the past must be tackled by the action of the Government.

As all Members are aware, the right to birth information is central to the wishes of many survivors. It is essential that survivors are given access to their birth certificates and early life information. I welcome the commitment of the Government to advancing information and tracing legislation through pre-legislative scrutiny in 2021. That should be done with as much speed as possible but, equally, it is very important that it is done in a thorough and correct manner. All Members will be aware of the damaging consequences that poorly drafted legislation can have. It is obvious that this is a complex area. I assume the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth will ensure that people can access personal information contained within the records of the commission, in line with existing GDPR legislation. That too needs to be done as quickly as possible while appreciating the constraints under which Department staff are working during Covid-19.

Specific health supports for survivors to which the Government has committed, including counselling services and access to patient liaison support services, must be rolled out as soon as possible. Similarly, the commitment by the Government to advance legislation relating to burial and to support the excavation and, where possible, the identification of remains, together with their dignified reburial should be done in the coming months and sufficient resources put in place in order that the work can be carried out swiftly. We have to deal with this now.

It is also important that future generations are aware how the State failed these innocent women and children. In that regard, the commitment by the Government to examine how the

short video produced by the commission which details the experiences of women and children who spent time in institutions can be incorporated into the second level school curriculum is welcome. Although it is not a priority compared with some of the other actions that need to be taken, I believe it should be done and that it would be beneficial for future generations. In addition, the national memorial records centre to be developed in co-operation with the survivors and their advocates is a vital commitment that should be developed within the timeline of this Government.

We need to listen to the criticisms survivors have made of the report. I have not read all of the report, but some of the parts I did read struck me as being cold and lacking in compassion. I recommend that further engagement be had with survivors and the groups which represent them in order to see how this can be remedied. Additions or amendments to the report should be considered. This report should serve as the voice of survivors and if they are not happy, then that is a significant issue.

I wish to acknowledge the full apology offered yesterday by Galway County Council. It was appropriate and very necessary, particularly with regard to the Tuam mother and baby home. The council acknowledges that when these women and children were at their most vulnerable, they were let down by Galway County Council and the State as a whole.

There are two issues I wish to briefly raise with the Minister. Are there concerns relating to other sites across the country? Representations have been made to me in that regard. I am concerned about whether a full and entire investigation has been carried out on all sites that were reported. Finally, I believe that ongoing consultation with the survivors' groups will be required. It is essential that they are fully involved in the actions that need to be taken. I ask the Minister to advise on plans to do so with urgency.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I call Senator Dolan.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I thank the Acting Chairperson. It is very important that he is in the Chairperson's seat for this debate. I thank the Minister and his Department for continuing to hear statements on this issue. This independent report is a significant body of work that was led by Judge Yvonne Murphy, Professor Mary E. Daly and Dr. William Duncan. Its pages talk about the lives of more than 56,000 women and 57,000 children across 14 mother and baby homes and four county homes between 1922 and 1998. Over that 80-year period, 9,000 children died in those homes. The lived experience as told by survivors and children is absolutely appalling. The confidential committee gathered accounts from survivors, as well as people who worked in those institutions. We can only imagine what it was like for survivors, mothers and children, now as adults telling of their painful experiences, sometimes for the first time. Some of those people had never even spoken to their families. I am conscious of those suffering in silence while listening to these debates, and who may never have spoken of their experiences.

More than 550 courageous people who came through those homes gave accounts of their experiences, roughly 300 mothers and 200 children. It is shocking as Irish citizens and representatives to read those accounts, and to feel such shame. It is our history too of how Irish women and children were treated, and the stigma of being an unmarried mother, abandoned by families and children who were also set apart in Irish society. Kindness was in short supply for people who did not have any money to their name and those women were destitute and had nowhere to go. In that regard, I refer to the impact of poverty, misogyny, societal attitudes, the role of the church, entwined with that of the State, the lack of oversight, the lack of kindness,

even down to the lack of a proper diet for mothers and babies and the freezing conditions. In the cold blunt terms of the report, these homes “significantly reduced their prospects of survival”.

Instead of the homes being a safe haven for mothers and babies whom we should have cherished, the report clearly highlights where we failed as a State, a country and as a society. Mahatma Gandhi stated that, “A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members”. These personal testimonies from survivors show us that we now have an opportunity for our weakest members, for our destitute and abandoned young mothers and children, to speak. In those confidential committees, they talked about how there was a lack of education and sexual education and about not knowing the facts of life.

Yes, the Catholic Church had an influence in that regard in Irish society and in the educational system at that time. Brutal accounts, which are so hard to read, have been given of rape and abuse within families. We heard of how the homes were actually an escape from those harrowing conditions. I refer to the role of families and the Catholic Church in organising for young girls to be sent to the homes. We know from this report the importance of the provision of secondary school education and the unmarried mother’s allowance, as well as other social changes. Those innovations brought more rights and financial independence to unmarried mothers.

Being from Ballinasloe in County Galway, I was drawn to the commission’s report on the Tuam Mother and Baby Home. It was initially located in Glenamaddy, before moving to Tuam. The home took unmarried mothers from counties Galway and Mayo, and from my own home area. Tuam stands out in this report for the appalling conditions of the building, the lack of midwives, how some of the children boarded out and for the stigma and physical abuse they endured. It also stands out for how, even at that time, decisions of the local authority were deferred to the clergy.

The heart-rending element of the high infant mortality rate in the 1920s and 1930s was at its worst during the Emergency, or war years, in the 1940s. Inflation rose by nearly 70% for the cost of goods and the capitation fee did not change. There were huge food shortages and terrible times in this country. The lack of food and nutrition meant most mothers could not breast-feed their own children and that led to more infection and increased gastroenteritis. These were the reasons for the high mortality rate. More than 978 children died in the Tuam Mother and Baby Home with no burial records. This is shameful. Where were our hearts?

The historian, Catherine Corless, was instrumental in the fight for these mothers and babies. She sparked this commission of investigation and was committed to sourcing death certificates. There has been strong criticism of the local authority in Galway at that time, which owned and governed the mother and baby home in Tuam. Meetings were held there and yet there was never a discussion of the infant mortality rates, and neither was there ever such a discussion at national level in Government. Those deaths were being recorded at the time but there was silence, the same silence that causes the worst outrages in society, where people just cannot speak of events and no questions are asked.

I spoke with survivors and survivor representative groups to try to understand the hurt and anger over these serious issues. I pay tribute to survivors and to those suffering in silence while dealing with the traumatic effects. The helpline number in Roscommon, Galway and Mayo is 1800 234114. I support the recommendations in this independent report and that the responses should be survivor-led and survivor-centred. I call on the Minister to review survivors’ con-

cerns regarding the reflection of testimonies in this report.

The model of the commission of investigation may not have been the right instrument, but we had no other choice at the time. I refer to information and tracing legislation. Legislation on the Tuam exhumation, the general scheme of the Certain Institutional Burials (Authorised Interventions) Bill, is scheduled to have pre-legislative scrutiny in the Joint Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration. That needs to happen quickly. There must also be redress, as well as counselling and enhanced medical cards. Memorialisation and legacy should be part of the educational system.

The Taoiseach gave an apology on behalf of the Government. The chief executive and cathaoirleach of Galway County Council also gave a full apology yesterday and again this morning on Galway Bay FM. It is important for the people of Galway to hear these acknowledgements, as so many families have been impacted by this report. The local authority was the entity in charge of the Tuam Mother and Baby Home and it noted in its apology that it failed in its duty of care. It acknowledged that the infant mortality was known and overcrowding led to poor infection control, and said it did not do enough. It noted the role of the local authority in ensuring care and also our role, as a State. Galway County Council has committed to co-operating fully in implementing whatever Government decisions are made on this matter. The survivors' group and the Tuam Mother and Baby Home Alliance have welcomed this apology from Galway County Council, and I am very happy to hear that. They have also acknowledged the support provided by Galway County Council in recent times.

The Sisters of Bon Secours, which ran the home in Tuam, have apologised. A contribution to the redress scheme is required and some may already have been committed. This has taken so many years and caused so much pain to survivors. This report is immensely distressing and is a dark part of Ireland's history. It is the first step to justice for survivors and their families to give them a voice. Our country will be judged across the world for how it treats its weakest members.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Like other Senators, I am very conscious of the symbolism and significance of having Senator Boyhan in the Chair for this debate.

The last few weeks have been extremely difficult for survivors and their families. The publication of the report of the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes has reopened many difficult memories and caused enormous upset and re-traumatisation. Today, the report into the mother and baby homes and Magdalen laundries in the North has been published. I have no doubt this will be a very emotional and difficult time for survivors again.

I put on record my admiration for survivors' bravery, dignity and determination in coming forward to tell their stories, thus ensuring that their truth is told and their voices are no longer ignored. I want them to know that they are not alone, that we in this institution are listening and stand in solidarity with them. The sad reality is that these homes operated throughout Ireland, North and South. The commission's report states time and again how babies were born in one jurisdiction and then taken to another. Women and girls from the North were taken to homes in the South and *vice versa* to be out of sight of their communities. We have pages after pages of unimaginable heartbreak. This is an all-Ireland issue. We have a duty to survivors to acknowledge this and factor it into our approach and response. I note that the Minister held a meeting with the joint First Ministers, Michelle O'Neill and Arlene Foster, last week about the report in recognition of that fact, which I welcome. The details of the report in the North are currently

being outlined to our colleagues in the Assembly as we gather here for this debate in the Seanad. That report must be studied carefully.

Survivors' voices, needs and concerns must be at the very heart of our approach and the steps that we all collectively are to take next. Survivors throughout Ireland have always been very clear that they do not want tea and sympathy from the Government. They need to see clear action now to meet their needs and the challenges they still face today. We can never undo the hurt and pain caused by these institutions but we can act now to ensure further harm is not caused. That is the very least we owe to survivors and their families. There are several ways we can do this, including ensuring access to birth records. My colleague in the Dáil, Deputy Kathleen Funchion, published legislation last week to ensure survivors have a legal right to a fundamental point that many of us take for granted, namely, the right to know who one is and where one comes from.

We must also find a compassionate and sensitive way to address institutions where human remains are believed to be buried on site. This must be done in consultation with survivors. Survivors also need access to specialist supports. I have made this case in the Seanad for some years. They also need access to specialist support for accessing housing, counselling services and other therapies as well as proper access to medical cards. We have an obligation to do the right thing for survivors across our island. For too long, the Government, the church and society have let down survivors and this must change. I have no doubt that I speak on behalf of all colleagues inside and outside this Chamber. For any survivors listening in, I want to send the clear message from the Seanad that we hear them, believe them and support them and I am committed to doing everything possible to ensure this Government now does right by them.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I, too, join with colleagues in saying it is very appropriate that Senator Boyhan is in the Chair today. I thank him for taking time to do so.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): Thank you, Senator.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: All of us waited for the publication of the report, but no one more so than the survivors and relatives of the survivors of the mother and baby homes.

The treatment of women in Ireland in recent history and, obviously, in the timeframe of the mother and baby homes can only be described as one of abandonment, distress, grief, loneliness, heartbreak, trauma and pure unkindness. The sight of the children in cots and on beds brings tears and a great deal of emotion about the distress these women must have gone through. As a young mother, the idea of having one's child taken away for short periods of time is very distressful, but these children were taken away permanently. Some were gone for decades and other parents never got to meet their children.

The State, society and the church have much to answer for. Ultimately, the church benefited from money from adoptions and from women working in the laundries. I am sure it got money from boarding out children. It must be held responsible. Its collection of properties nationally and around the world is ultimately due to the proceeds of crime. The Government must consider forcing the church to pay up and contribute to any redress scheme that is put in place. Not to do so flies in the face of everything this report says. It has a huge responsibility. Only for the massive contribution of Catherine Corless and her fearlessness, we would not even have this commission. She is possibly one of the bravest women in the country and we must pay great respect and tribute to her for the fact that she kept fighting for these children in

unmarked graves.

There is much to discuss and the report covers so much, ranging from vaccinations to horrible remarks made to women during childbirth, that it is hard to have a structure for discussing it because it is all so terrifying and shameful. Obviously, we have started with an apology and a report, but we must follow through on the ancillary reliefs for the victims and survivors. There must be follow-through with medical cards, healthcare, mental health supports and a red-tape-free redress scheme. Local authorities, as Senator Chambers said, should follow suit. I would like to see an apology from Dublin City Council. I am glad the Taoiseach issued an apology, but the Minister must follow up with a redress scheme. Many of these women and other survivors are not getting any younger, so time is of the essence. The Minister said the scheme will be published in April, but I urge him to expedite it so people have access to it urgently. We know it takes time and lawyers to set it up, but I hope it will be lawyer free and accessible.

It is very disappointing that the survivors felt that the report did not adequately reflect the testimony they gave, but we believe them and will stick with them. Perhaps we need to go back on some of the independent testimony. Obviously, the report is big, but we may need to rerun that phase of it. Many people I have spoken to would love to have a public inquiry. Mr. Joe Duffy did a good service for the State when he had many women on his radio programme over recent days giving their oral testimony. Many women would like the option of oral testimony, and if it is the case that this phase must be redone, the Minister should consider it. That is what the victims deserve and it is important, as part of our national history, that we know fully what happened. We need to see documentary evidence of oral testimony.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: As other speakers said, it is good to see Senator Boyhan in the Chair today. I welcome the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, and thank him for coming to the House last week. I concur with the comments of the leader of the Green Party in the Seanad, Senator Pauline O’Reilly, on the first day of this debate. We could talk about this for so long, although there is a limited time available to me. Perhaps it is therapeutic. It is the most upsetting episode that has been discussed in my adult life as a public representative, so one could ask what it was like for the victims, the survivors and the families. It is a dark stain on Ireland, but it is one that ought not to be removed. It should be a timely reminder. While we cannot remove it, and should not strive to remove it, we should acknowledge it and we should respond appropriately. Tragically and unfortunately, we cannot turn back the clock, but we can determine the future.

What can I suggest in the short time available to me? The first point is a very obvious one and it goes without saying. The Minister knows this. It is to listen, listen better and to listen again and again and to reflect, because the survivors know best. They know what they want. Reparations are required. I do not use the word compensation. That is a small but important part of a therapeutic, collaborative justice for the perpetrators, not for the victims. Everyone should have a reflection and kindness and compassion without any red tape. A full suite of reparations must be made available to all the victims and their families. That includes compensation, but so much more, because no money would ever compensate.

I acknowledge the apology of Councillor Charity on behalf of Galway County Council, but what more can we do? There is a legal term, *in loco parentis*, where one takes the place of the parents. Who is going to take the place of the deceased children who had no voice at the time? Perhaps their families and relations are no longer with us. It is up to us not to miss the boat twice and to do everything we can to stand up for them, even if they are not in this world any

more, and to ensure, however retrospectively and posthumously, that dignity is afforded to each and every child who died and to the mothers as well.

I spoke recently to an elderly gentleman who as a child remembers women picking potatoes outside the home, often heavily pregnant. He did not know, and he is so upset at what happened. It is so upsetting. Where do we go when we consider that not only did these people do nothing wrong, they were severely violated, physically, sexually and mentally? It was a different time. There is not an awful lot that we can do, but something we can do that would be small crumbs of comfort for the pain and perhaps some day it will help, is if as legislators we could promise to keep our eyes open and to be vigilant. It is extremely late, but it is never too late. We had the Dáil Éireann republican courts from 1919 to 1924 during the struggle for independence when the people turned their backs on the British common law system. There was a judge all those years ago called James Creed Meredith. In a groundbreaking decision at the time, by applying Brehon law rather than common law, he ruled that the father of a child born out of wedlock ought to pay maintenance. It is a small thing. When we restored the British-style Judiciary in 1924 we reapplied the common law and we reversed that decision. That was the position all the way up to our lifetime and the 1980s. Then, past Members of this House - we should give them credit for it - including Mary Robinson and Nuala Fennell, were instrumental in giving recognition to such basic rights as inheritance rights and recognition for children born outside of wedlock.

Can we stay vigilant? The torture may not appear in the same shape but last week a 53-year-old man was sentenced to 12 and a half years, with two years suspended, for coercive control, intimidation and multiple assaults on his former partner over a two-year period. He was the first person to be convicted for coercive control following a trial. These are small steps forward but they might help the healing if this problem appears in a different guise in the way we are today in modern Ireland. The victim said she was only rescued due to the vigilance of doctors and gardaí.

I am saying these are small steps but we must translate words into action for the victims and their families at this stage. They do not want words - although they are important in healing - they want positive reassuring action. We must hear them out and do everything that is feasible for their terrible ongoing suffering, which is such a blight and stain on our nation and always will be.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): As I said earlier, I am conscious of time given the number of people who want to speak. Everyone who takes an extra minute cuts into the time of someone else. We have a full agenda and a full list of speakers. I appeal to everyone to be mindful that the limit is six minutes.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: As we all know, the State and the church are responsible, and must be accountable, for the mother and baby homes and county homes spoken about in this report and beyond it. I join in the rejection of any attempts to minimise that. It is simply not credible or acceptable for the commission to claim there is no evidence that women were forced to enter mother and baby homes due to the church or State authorities. A few pages after that claim in the report we hear of bishops saying the only thing that prevents women from leaving is the strict supervision and boundary walls. Women themselves have told us about incarceration and escape.

To describe the awful tone and skewed framing by the commission as overly legalistic is to

give it too much credit. It is not legalistic; it is defensive. It amounts to more walls corralling survivors into the confidential committee, squeezing their testimony into unseen questionnaires and denying requests for public hearings, even though the statutory instrument which established the commission stated that individuals should be able to request privacy and not have secrecy forced upon them.

That statutory instrument was from 2015, one year after the public duty relating to human rights and equality came into law. The report tells us that the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission asked for any investigation to be informed by human rights law, but the Government did not opt for that approach in its mandate to the commission. This raises very serious questions. The sidelining of human rights really does show.

This report is not the new chapter that we needed. Yet, I hope it will be the last we hear of the old excuses. A radically different approach has to begin now. It must be led by the voices, needs, demands and well-being of survivors. It must offer support, redress and justice not only for those who endured the 18 institutions in the report but also for the many others affected by a wider systemic architecture of control and abuse right across the island. We heard again today that in Northern Ireland more of that architecture of control and abuse was targeted at women and their lives.

I welcome that the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth took the advice of those of us in this House and many others by keeping a copy of all of the files. It is vital that they reach the Minister in unredacted form and that the commission respects the general data protection regulation when preparing for the transfer. As was vigorously pointed out in this House by human rights and data protection experts and, crucially, by survivors themselves, when the Minister receives these files he will become a data controller with a responsibility to respond to individuals' requests for their personal information under Article 15 of the regulation. It was a relief to see his Department's belated acceptance and acknowledgement of that fact. I am glad the Minister personally seems keen to take an open and empowering approach to such requests. It is vital that bodies such as Tusla also change their responses and approaches to reflect the new-found understanding of the general data protection regulation, GDPR. The centring of an individual's right of access to personal information will, I hope, result in a very different approach in the information and tracing legislation the Minister is to bring forward later this year. I look forward to engaging with the Minister on that. We should not have to wait that long for progress on birth certificates.

As data controller, the Minister may also identify and facilitate other appropriate processing of information from these files in the public interest. That may, and probably should, include further investigations into the vaccine trials, financial exploitation and forced and illegal adoptions. It is clearly evidenced in the testimony of the women in other reporting by persons such as journalists for the *Irish Examiner* and elsewhere, and in the fact that other records have been shown to be falsified, that there was an issue with regard to forced and illegal adoptions. Indeed, there was extensive lobbying to avoid the introduction of proper legal oversight in respect of adoption. The report itself reflects that.

The apologies at national and local level are right and necessary but there are also issues of justice involved which cannot be forgotten. These include issues of financial justice, justice with regard to adoption and justice with regard to graves and infant death, not only in Tuam but in Bessborough and so many other places across the country. It is crucial that no individual be asked to give up his or her legal rights as part of any redress scheme. Redress must be speedy,

substantial and centred on the needs of survivors. It must learn from the mistakes of past schemes. There can be no waivers, no gagging orders and absolutely no indemnity for religious orders. These orders must make payment. We should also re-examine their exemption from capital gains tax in light of the amount of property we know has been disposed of and the fact that this property was so deeply rooted in this discrimination in Irish society.

I will finish as I know others wish to speak but there are wider lessons I ask the Minister to learn. When the State puts a payment on the heads of vulnerable people, as it still does with regard to direct provision and homelessness, it can be dangerous. When the State surrenders power to religious orders, as is currently planned for the national maternity hospital, it can be dangerous. I urge the Minister to work with all of us to build a state that takes responsibility for the past and for the future.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I informally said to the Cathaoirleach earlier that nothing could be more apt than Senator Boyhan, who has been so courageous and eloquent in his own testimony, chairing this session. I welcome the Minister. I have listened to him on many occasions and I know he is patently sincere and committed to doing the right thing. Two parallel approaches to the report of the commission are needed. We must first remember, acknowledge and apportion and accept blame. We must also give people access to their family history and all data and information, including birth certificates, medical histories and everything else. We must give payment, redress and retribution to people. It cannot be miserly and, like my colleagues, I advise the Minister to make such redress generous and easy to get. We owe these people no less. We did such wrongs and now there is a chance to do the wholesome and right thing. Free counselling and medical cards should be available, as should appropriate housing in appropriate locations, which may involve transfers. In other words, these people should have a holistic response.

Turning to my first response to the commission's report and what is required, this involves remembering. We must not write the wrongs out of history. It is clear from the personal testimonies in the report that the treatment of mothers and babies in mother and baby homes was barbaric, cruel, sadistic and inhuman. It is as much part of our history as the glorious and glamorous. Let us make no attempt to fudge that. The remembering should be in the proper burial of the up to 9,000 babies who died. I am not saying they are all improperly buried but most are. That should happen. That should mean the development of a proper remembrance centre, as has been mooted in Seán MacDermott Street. Elsewhere, there should be commemorative plaques and commemorative ceremonies in each local authority area and generally, there should be a State acknowledgement. There should be support for students who do research in this area and for any centres that remember this and any people who write about it, recall it and support this. We must be generous and imaginative. I ask the Minister to look at that whole area of remembrance.

It is important for us to remember too that it has a civilising effect on people to remember what was wrong in the past. The acknowledgement must come from the religious. It came from the Sisters of Bon Secours and that must be built on. Archbishop Eamon Martin's apology is welcome in this context. However, the acknowledgement must also come from State employees who, either in a county home or by co-operating with the incarceration, have a guilt. The acknowledgement must also come from our people, the political class. We did not do enough about it either. The acknowledgement of the wrong must come from all of us who lived through that time when respectability, property ownership and misogyny ranked much more highly than the welfare of the abandoned mothers and babies. I feel personally ashamed to say

that I lived through that period and that we allowed all this to happen, to paraphrase President Reagan, on our watch.

Much criticism has arisen from the survivors and political leaders led by our colleague, the Leader of the House, Senator Doherty, regarding the language and tenor of the report and the way it was dealt with. It is a pity that legalese was allowed to replace plain speaking. The legalese could have been an appendix or a footnote. In a legal sense it is stated that mothers were not forced into homes. Of course, they were not arrested on foot of a court order, but their expulsion from the family home and the lack of any other State support gave them only two options – abortion or to enter the penal mother and baby homes. Similarly, in legal terms, the report can confirm that again mothers were not forced to have children adopted but where was the choice? Again, they had no choice. The mother was alone, defenceless, without resources and under pressure from all sides to adopt. Only semantics can remove force from this. Needless to say, there are people, religious and lay, who did the right thing and acted in a humane way. They can quietly and privately take a bow and should do so but that does not mean we can distract from those who have done the wrong thing to vulnerable babies and their mothers.

We should openly admit that a wrong was done that needs righting. The process is just starting now and I see it as being a two-pronged approach. The first is that we are remembering and acknowledging in a very public, holistic and proper way. We are even allowing further testimony. We are doing all that. The second is that we compensate in a generous, holistic and unmiserly way that will not be difficult to access. These people experienced enough hardship as vulnerable people. It is time they were the recipients of kindness from the State.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): The Leas-Chathaoirleach is spot on time – a man of experience, clearly. I call Senator Byrne.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Like others, I thank the Acting Chairperson, Senator Boyhan, for his personal testimony in this House last week. It was an important contribution to the debate. It was an honour for me to hear it. I thank the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, for his time and personal commitment to this issue which is a challenging one. I know that the Minister and everybody within these Houses want to do the right thing. It is a dark chapter in our history that we should not forget and we should learn lessons from it. I agree with Senator Higgins that particularly in the area of direct provision there are lessons for society today that we must also learn.

In all of our actions and the approach that we take to this report, we need to put people at heart of any decisions we make. The women and children whose stories are now being heard and must continue to be heard must be in our thoughts. They need to be at the centre of any legislative approach. In terms of the actions that are taken by the State and State agencies, the focus must be on how they will impact on those women and children, how they will understand them and what supports they will need to be able to understand them. As referenced already, that approach must apply to Tusla in particular. The Taoiseach’s apology was very welcome. The issue now is how we follow up with actions not only in terms of legislation but communication and engagement.

I would like to make a number of points. One of the questions that was raised during the early part of this debate was where were the fathers? It is important to acknowledge that not every father abandoned the mother or his child. There were instances where because the young woman became pregnant outside of marriage for family or social circumstances she was forced

into a home. I know of a case in north Wexford involving a man named Barry McGlynn. His girlfriend became pregnant during the 1960s. She was placed in St. Patrick's mother and baby home on the Navan Road. He would have stood by her. She could not leave until she signed adoption papers and Barry could not see her or his child. That is incarceration. It is imprisonment. In any legal system under *habeas corpus* people would be required to say why a person is being detained. In this case, the father would have stood by the mother. All fathers did not abandon their children but because of circumstances they lost out.

Another group of people who we need to acknowledge during this debate are the parents who adopted children. For many of them, this report can make for difficult reading. I know from talking to some of them that they have feelings of guilt. Those who are adoptive parents who loved those children as their own are not responsible for what happened. They should be thanked where they provided loving homes in what was a very dark chapter in our history.

The crucial issue will be the question around birth certificates and rights to identity. This is really important. A right to identity and a birth certificate is an intrinsic part of who we are. It is important for us to know where we come from but for reasons of health, it is essential. I have haemochromatosis, which is a genetic disease. Once it is diagnosed early a person can live happily with it. For those who were adopted and do not know that there is heart disease or haemochromatosis in their family background that places them at a greater risk and *vice versa* an adopted person might discover that he or she has a disease that may be hereditary and could inform his or her birth mother or other family members of it being an issue. It is really important that information is shared.

I do not buy it that some natural mothers do not want contact with their children. The evidence shows that one in 20 natural mothers who were on the national adoption contact preference register did not want contact with their son or daughter, but at no stage did they want information about their health circumstances and so forth denied to their child. As Senator Joe O'Reilly said, we have got to move away from some of the legalese. I appreciate that there must be a legal basis for whatever we do, but we must think about how it will ultimately impact on our citizens. I know the Minister and every Member of the House want to do the right thing but if we look at how our decisions impact on people, we will not stray too far.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I, too, recognise the Acting Chairperson's position today both as the leader of my group and as somebody who has been brave enough to put his personal life in the public domain. I welcome the Minister to the House.

It took five years to produce this report and I am sure those who produced it believed it to be a considered and complete report, but I agree with most other speakers who said that they must be willing to go public and take questions on the report. The late poet, Eavan Boland, said that in Ireland the past was a place of whispers, shadows and vanishings while history is the story of heroes. The report has unearthed a dark, distant past in this country. Personal testimonies of survivors of these homes are harrowing. They show us that the oppression of women who became pregnant outside marriage was brutal, widespread and systemic.

There has been talk about redress in this debate. A redress scheme must encompass everybody. Whether somebody was five minutes in one of these places, it must encompass all of them. There cannot be a cut-off date whereby somebody is entitled and somebody else is not.

The system in this country labelled unmarried pregnant women as sinners and their children

as illegitimate. It stripped the women of their dignity and almost dehumanised them in the process. One of the most difficult to read sections in the report relates to the rampant infant mortality. Over 9,000 children, each one a citizen of this State, died in the care of the church and State, many without the dignity of a funeral and a marked grave. If it was not for the tireless work of Ms Catherine Corless, the commission may never have been established. There still may be outstanding questions to be answered.

While it is very distressing to learn about the ways in which the mothers and babies were treated, it is equally distressing to listen to recent Government commentary on the report. The apologies have come too early. Let us see a redress system and care put in place for those who were in these homes and, having proved we are sorry by our actions, we can then apologise. I have no time for these apologies where it is a case of, "I have said 'sorry' so let us move on". That is not good enough. The response to the publication of the report by the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, was that it shames Irish society. He said that women who were "pregnant outside of marriage, some very young, some victims of rape, were not supported by their families or by the father of the child. They were forced to turn to the church and State for refuge ...". I was in a house on the night that a girl who was working away from home rang her mother to tell her she was pregnant. The girl's father was a stern, Victorian man and I remember the family that night being in panic about how they were going to deal with it and how they would tell the father. As soon as that man heard it, the first thing he said was: "Bring my daughter home and let me look after her". Not every family disowned their child and I take grave exception to the practice of calling out families as having deserted their children.

As regards the Catholic Church, I listened to the archbishop and the Primate of All Ireland say that we should not take it out on the church. Then we read the report and see that when Mayo County Council wanted to take children - boys up to the age of five years and girls up to the age of seven years - out of Tuam the response of the holy nuns was that if it took the children out, it would not be able to send another girl there. It was outrageous.

I cannot agree with the report's simplistic explanation that the women should have been at home with their families, but they were rejected by those families. They were not in all cases rejected by their families. It is deeply insulting to those families who looked after their daughters.

We passed legislation recently in this House against the type of coercive treatment that went on in this State and about which we are talking. It defines it as threats of humiliation, intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish or frighten the victim. That is exactly what we did. Certainly, when I was a boy growing up there were no girls pregnant in Galway; they were all sent away on a holiday and when they came back nine months later nobody dared to ask where they had been. I believe that for the commission, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste to take the view that it was families who failed women and children gaslights the survivors and undermines their own memory and testimony. I would, however, apportion due blame to the fathers of children. When I was growing up I knew fellas who had made girls pregnant and then took to the high hills leaving them swinging in the wind. This is not to take away from what Senator Byrne has said. There were some very decent lads who had made girls pregnant and wanted to do the right thing but between church and State they were prevented access to the girls they had made pregnant. Let us be honest about what took place in this State.

I think of the stories. When the Bessborough story came out on television a girl I knew from many years ago, who I thought had gone to a family when she was pregnant, contacted me to

tell me she had been in Bessborough. That girl is now haunted by her time in Bessborough. I am going to run out of time and there is so much I want to say about this. I am damned if I am going to allow families be accused of rejecting their own children. I am damned if I am going to accept the word of the church that has said “We did not do this” and “We did not do that”. I have read what the report says about the Bishop of Tuam who said that a mother and baby home could not be close to a street because people know what happens to those girls when they see a man. For God’s sake let the church take some responsibility.

On redress, there is one crowd that nobody is talking about. We have spoken about the church and the State, but what about the chemical companies that developed a vaccine to use on the young children who were in these homes and had no say? It is time for GlaxoSmithKline and the other medical vaccine companies to come forward and take responsibility for what they did. I commend the Minister on what he is doing. The Minister is a decent guy and he took this on after five years. He has taken a lot of stick. I commend the Minister on being here today and I commend him on the work he is doing and the way he has tried to deal with this. I ask the Minister not to make them beg for redress.

Senator Seán Kyne: I welcome the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman. I welcome the publication of the report and I acknowledge the work and effort that went into its production. As others have said, it is important that the recommendations and summaries are discussed with survivors and that their views on the next steps forward are taken into account and are followed through. There are many very worthy recommendations in the report but if we have to go further, and if we need to go further, engagement with survivors needs to be looked at.

It is fair to say that every adjective has probably been used in describing this period of our past. It is easy to look at previous times with today’s lens. The cathaoirleach and the chief executive of Galway County Council both made statements at yesterday’s council meeting. The chief executive, Mr. Kevin Kelly, said:

The report contributes significantly to our deeper appreciation and understanding of the past failures of the State, including this local authority, in the provision of care to the women who were forced to enter the Tuam Mother and Baby Home. It is to our shame, that we acknowledge, that there, when at their most vulnerable, in need of compassion, empathy, support and understanding and in need of our care, we failed them.

[...]

The report identified that in the congregated settings of mother and baby homes poor sanitary conditions had much more serious consequences for disease and infection control and identified Tuam as having appalling conditions. It is also clear that the death rate among infants in the Tuam mother and baby home was noted and, while known to be a multiple of the general population, did not prompt appropriate action.

The lack of respect and dignity afforded to the women and children in death is also particularly upsetting and a source of great hurt and sorrow. The council accepts its role in failing to ensure that these individuals were afforded the dignity of an appropriate and respectful resting place.

[...]

No one can change the past; however it is important that we accept and learn from it,

acknowledge the sad and painful truth, the personal impact and heavy burden carried by survivors and humbly acknowledge our failings.

I, as a former member, concur with the full statement produced yesterday by Galway County Council.

I was shocked to read that the greatest number of admissions to homes were in the 1960s and 1970s. I would have thought, if someone had asked, that it would have been the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. The 1960s were a period of change and industrialisation in this country, when people were coming back home. We joined the European Economic Community, EEC, in the early 1970s. To think that this was the period of the highest admissions to these homes is hard to fathom.

It is also clear that in this State, it was a man's world. There were men who got girls and women pregnant and did not take responsibility. Of course, that does not apply to all men, as others have said, but there were those who did not take responsibility. We think of the men in the church, and it was predominantly men, although many nuns also acted in an unchristian manner within these institutions. We think also of the men in politics, and it was predominantly men, in the Dáil, Seanad and local councils. Some of those men were in charge of these institutions.

Where the man in question did not take responsibility and left the woman or girl alone, she faced difficult choices to go abroad to relations, perhaps, or else to tell her family and present to one of these homes until such time as the baby was born and adopted. We need to acknowledge the impact that these forced periods in county or mother and baby homes had on the children and their mothers, how their stay impacted their lives, how many, if not all, were scarred by the experience, certainly mentally, and had consequences throughout their lives. There was unfilled potential and lives were ruined. There were searches for adopted children who would have had questions as adults or teenagers, whenever they found out.

The connection between church and State was clear. There was hypocrisy in a church that acted in a Christian spirit, as it were, but acted in the opposite way to unmarried mothers. The issue of legitimacy was being debated in these Houses in the 1980s. It is hard to fathom and shameful.

There was also the role of a society that was so in thrall to religion and dogma that Christian actions were not followed. The Taoiseach stated last week in the Dáil that the State has failed time and again, for decades, to protect some of its most vulnerable citizens. That is absolutely true. Former Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, talked in his speech to Pope Francis about the fact that we, as a State, did not have a Minister for health or social welfare until 1947. There was an interconnection between church and State. Obviously, not all of it was bad, but this was a shameful period and we need to apologise and atone for it. I acknowledge the work that the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, has done and the particular interest that he has in the matter. I know that he will follow up with survivors in line with the recommendations in this report. That will be important.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I call on Senator Hoey. I am conscious that another three Senators have yet to speak so we have to keep tightly to the time limits so that we allow the Minister time to come back.

Senator Annie Hoey: That is no problem. I will start by thanking the many people who

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have taken the time to speak to me over the past while on this particularly sensitive topic. I thank the Acting Chairperson in particular for talking to me last week and being kind with his thoughts and experiences. I thank some other people, including Samantha Long, who has been an eternal voice on this issue, for being so generous in publicly sharing her story again and again. I thank people like Maeve O'Rourke and all the legal experts who have given so freely of their expertise in this area. I thank Susan Lohan and all those who so eloquently advocated for justice for a long time. I thank the many survivors who reached out to me with their stories. I cannot undo their pasts. I cannot take away their pain. I cannot give them all their lost time back. However, I can be part of a movement of people who are going to advocate fiercely for survivors' rights to justice, to information, to an identity, to funding and to have dignity in their lives in future after they were so cruelly denied it before.

Much discourse in recent days has concerned how survivors felt they were not believed, that their testimony was not taken into account or their truth was not treated with the care and respect it deserved. I put it on the record that I believe the survivors. I believe their testimony. I believe the testimony they have shared about the horrors they experienced and I believe their memories and recollections. I believe their pain. I believe their anger. I believe their hurt. I believe them.

We must recognise that we have to go beyond saying we are sorry. Apologies are well and good, and they are extraordinarily necessary. Many people I spoke to said last week's apology was so very needed. However, an apology given when the survivors had not even seen the report, nor the summary of the report, and some people have spoken as well of the problematic nature of that summary of the report, just does not cut it. There needs to be action. All the actions I will suggest could be taken have come from conversations that I have had with survivors, advocates or legal experts or they are reflected in the report. These are not things that I have plucked out of thin air.

Survivors need access to hard copies of this report. We must think about the composition of this group of survivors from the homes, and in that regard we must consider the accessibility of this report and its summary. Survivors also need access to their birth certificates and restitution of their identities. We must get rid of the 1973 cut-off point for redress. My colleague, Senator Sherlock, spoke eloquently on that point. Survivors need access to information and this must be a priority. Counselling and other elements cannot be provided until people know who they are. Access to information also includes access to baptismal records. People must be given access to State and privately held administrative files. I and several legal experts believe that withholding those records would be considered a violation of general data protection regulation, GDPR, legislation.

Survivors need access to redress. I do not believe that the 2015 Act to provide healthcare for Magdalen survivors was sufficient. Survivors must get the standard Health (Amendment) Act, HAA, card. My colleague, Senator Sherlock, also talked about Sean McDermott Street and a national archive. This would allow for an ongoing, survivor-led investigation and a fact-finding process for survivors. It is important as well that archival and memorial resources must not be restricted to Dublin. We have heard accounts here of the experience of survivors from all over the country, so it is important that it is not just a Dublin-based archival record that will be established. We need further investigation and interrogation of illegal adoptions and to compare the legal adoption numbers with other available data.

We cannot go back in time but we can take actions to give survivors dignity and support

for the rest of their lives. I also want to reflect on the intergenerational impact these experiences have had. Senator Boyhan very kindly talked to me about that aspect last week. There are survivors of these homes trying to live their lives with the trauma they must process every day. That trauma can lead to personal difficulties and relationship difficulties and can impact on survivors' spouses, their children and their families. A whole cohort of people surrounded by survivors is also affected by this trauma, therefore, and they also desperately need support.

I am struck by one aspect of this situation especially. I do not think we comprehend the breadth of work that still needs to be done. I refer to the amount of investigation that remains to be done and how much more we need to do even to begin to uncover all that has happened. We must also look to international examples of how other countries have dealt with their pasts and atrocities presided over by the state. What can we learn about how other nations have faced their pasts to look forward and ensure that such cruelties never happen again? Has contact been made with experts abroad? Has any investigation been undertaken to examine how we can learn from their experiences?

I want to comment on a final point that many people have already addressed. I refer to the insistence that the church and the State did not force women into the mother and baby homes and that there was no forced adoption or coercion. I speak for many people when I say that those statements are incredible, almost audacious. My colleague, Senator Craughwell, put it correctly when he said that this is gaslighting survivors. In the same week that we have had the first person convicted and sentenced for coercive control, a crime for which I believe a twelve-and-a-half-year sentence was handed down, I find it extraordinary that we can recognise coercive control as a crime but not cast our eyes back into our grisly past and see the deep coercion that took place in those homes. When a person is left with no options, no choices and no way out, that is coercion. For context, we are now in the third decade of the century after the last home closed. That is a long time for us still not to have got to grips with this. We have not yet learned from our mistakes, and I am referring to direct provision and the need to give access to birth certificates. There is an awful lot more we must do and we really must learn from the past. There is a great amount of work that needs to be done. We cannot undo the wrongs of the past but we can step up to our obligations to try to give dignity and respect to the survivors and their families into the future.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I first acknowledge the Acting Chairperson, Senator Boyhan's contribution to the debate. It is very appropriate that he is sitting in the Chair today. I hope it is symbolic of where we have come to as a country, where we have someone with his life and experience holding that seat during this debate. I thank the Minister for being here and for the work he has done over recent months. It is incredibly difficult and I know the work he is doing is very genuine. The outcomes he wants are the ones the survivors want. It is not easy to do but commitment and support across the board and across the House are what is needed. I commend as well my colleague, Senator Seery Kearney, on the work she has been doing over recent months within our party in educating an awful lot of us in the detail of this. I do not think anyone can pretend to be an expert on this and have a full understanding of it. It is such a detailed report and a detailed time.

I will focus on County Tipperary and the Sean Ross Abbey because it is my own county and the gravity of the story of the mother and baby homes is very strong in Roscrea. There were 6,414 women admitted to the home and 6,079 children were born there. It was privately owned and privately run. It secured major funding from the hospitals commission, which though technically independent worked closely with the then Department of Local Government and Public

Health, DLGPH. The hospitals commission inspected the homes, commenting on facilities and matters that required improvement. It acted in a similar manner with all institutions it funded. When the Department of Health proposed turning the Sean Ross Abbey into a home for children with special needs in the 1960s, the Bishop of Killaloe rejected the proposal. His intervention resulted in a number of visits to the bishop by senior civil servants and letters from Ministers. The closure of the Sean Ross Abbey was delayed for several years until the bishop had died and his successor subsequently gave his approval. During those years, many children died.

The outcomes for children in mother and baby homes like Sean Ross Abbey changed significantly, however, from the late 1950s when legal adoption became common. For children who were in the Sacred Heart homes before 1960, the most common recorded outcome was that they were left with their mother or a member of their family. This creates the impression that the child was brought to his or her mother's family home and may have been raised in the family. However, the overwhelming majority of these children were placed at nurse in foster care, as it is called, either privately by the woman or by her family.

Sean Ross Abbey had a much higher incidence of mortality from major infectious diseases, more than any other mother and baby home. The transfer of mothers to the local fever hospital, where they worked as unpaid nurses, and their return to Sean Ross Abbey, where they appear to have transmitted the infection to their children, was responsible for the loss of many children's lives. A total of 1,090 of the 6,079 babies who were born at Sean Ross Abbey in Roscrea died. That is more than in Tuam. Some 79% of the deaths occurred between 1932 and 1947. The worst years were 1936 and 1942. Within two years of Sean Ross Abbey opening, the congregation acknowledged there was a problem with the high rate of infant mortality and sent a sister from Liverpool to investigate the cause. Registers of burials were not maintained. There is a designated burial ground and the commission has established that the coffined remains of some children under the age of one are buried there. There is almost no information about the 99% of mothers admitted to Sean Ross Abbey.

I acknowledge that the commission members did their job and found fault. It is now the responsibility of the Government and the Minister to bring a certain level of humanity to this. I commend the Minister's action plan with the 22 points and hope he gets the time to deliver on them. I know that is certainly his commitment. I recognise that the Taoiseach was right when he called out the State's failings of the mothers and the children. The first thing we need to do is to give people born in these institutions the right to know who they are and where their records are, to gather what we know about them, to try to place it as best we can and to give them access to it. They have the right to their information without delay. I appreciate the Minister is publishing legislation that brings those rights even beyond that entitlement to family documents and I commend him on that.

I find it incredibly difficult to speak about this for a number of reasons. As politicians we often feel obliged to speak about things of which we do not really have a full understanding. My only understanding of this matter is that I myself have a child who is a baby. More than 1,000 kids died in an institution in Tipperary, and I do not think there is any reading I can do to ever fully understand that. I commend what the Minister is trying to do. We are a different society and a different country now, but what happened back then was wrong back then, just as it is wrong now, and that should always be remembered. Time does not change what is right or wrong between now and then.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: May I add my words to yours, Acting Chairperson, in your

very dignified and emotive response last week to this report? I know it was deeply personal. We all learned from your dignity, so thank you, Senator Boyhan.

When we talk about the mother and baby homes, we are talking about our mothers, our aunts, our cousins, our sisters and our neighbours. We are talking about people within our own communities. These women were incarcerated, tortured, forced into servitude and systematically degraded. They were denied identity and denied education. Worse, they were denied access to their children. We all heard whispers and rumours growing up in the not-too-distant past. Now it is all laid bare for us all to absorb and to try to understand but, as the previous speaker said, we will never understand. Identity is exceptionally important - we all think about it and talk about it - whether to us as individuals, as a family, as a community or as a political party. The definition of identity is who we are, the way we think about ourselves, the way we are viewed by ourselves and others and the characteristics that define us. Our own personal identity, which many of us take for granted, is absolutely immense but it was denied to so many in the mother and baby homes. This report has made us stop and look at ourselves, our identity as a country, who we are as a nation and how people have been treated here.

Ireland in 2021 feels so much more modern and progressive and it is a jolt to remember that in our very recent past we were controlled by conservative, patriarchal and cruel church and State. The church and State stigmatised and punished women for having children outside marriage and allowed the fathers, many of them pillars of society, the church and the State, to continue living their lives unaffected by their actions although like everything, there were exceptions. We are left with a legacy of devastated women and their devastated children. These women, despite what the report may say, were forced to give their babies up for adoption and generations of people have had no access to vital information about their birth, including to whom they were born and from where they came. They were denied the keys to their own identity.

When we hear the phrase “mother and baby”, we think of the Madonna and of a loving mother and child relationship. When we hear the word “home”, we think of warmth, love, respect and protection. However, the mothers who went into these institutions, which I cannot call mother and baby homes, were forced to go there. Indeed, the institutions existed to punish, denigrate, humiliate, abuse and shame them. Many of the women stayed in institutions for all of their lives. Many others, due to the shame and stigma of being “fallen” women, were exiled to England or America and never came back. Mr. Patsy McGarry wrote a very moving piece in *The Irish Times* about his own aunt in that context.

I have friends who were born in these institutions who were, thankfully, adopted into very loving and warm homes. However, they now understand what their own biological mothers went through and their hurt is immense. They are very conflicted and I have no doubt that the same is true of all of the survivors. I am not happy with a report blaming wider society for what happened. Irish society throughout the 20th century was 100% influenced and shaped by the Catholic Church and its teachings. I am old enough to remember my mother being “churched” for the sin of conception, even in marriage, which is appalling. This is the society the report references. The Catholic Church was able to turn people against the women and their children. It did not just turn society against these citizens of Ireland; it also ingrained hatred and disgust towards them. I lay the greater proportion of the blame at the door of the Catholic Church. People were terrified of the church and the shame it preached from pulpits across the country. The church should pay a greater proportion of the compensation that the survivors deserve and this process should not be dragged out; the Government must act swiftly in that regard. While

no amount of money can compensate for the mental anguish and mistreatment suffered, proper reparation is nonetheless very important.

While this report is an important part of the story, it is not the most important part. We must publish the testimony of those affected, in a manner similar to the publication of *In Her Shoes - Women of the Eighth*. I listened to some of the personal stories at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills when it was dealing with legislation relating to some of these institutions and I will never, to my dying day, forget those testimonies. Access to birth documentation is now the most pressing issue and all of the recommendations of this report must be implemented as soon as possible.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): Before I call on the Minister to conclude the debate, I thank all of the Senators who contributed today and last week. Clearly, more would have liked to have contributed but because of Covid, and I want to stress this for people viewing, there are major restrictions on the number of Senators in the Chamber, which is understandable, but it is an important point. I again thank everyone.

Clearly, the major echoing theme today is that we believe. That is the key message. We have heard terrible stories of trauma and people terrorised and subjected to emotional, physical and sexual abuse and potential or threatened rape - very serious atrocities against our citizens and people. There will be other times and other debates to discuss that. I thank the Minister for being here and wish him well in what is an exceptionally challenging and difficult job. I think he is up to it. In particular, I thank An Cathaoirleach for asking me to preside as Acting Chairperson today. I am very moved and honoured by that and I thank him and Members across the House.

I recommend that every Member get a copy of the six volumes of the report. I thank the Minister for personally delivering them to me today. It is an enormous report. I hope every library in this State will have copies of these books both to take out and for reference because that is part of opening up, our discussion and shining a light on the facts and stories.

On a personal note, which has been echoed by everyone today, we believe the people who told their testimony and stories. They will not be forgotten. It is incumbent on us and from the debate in this House, I have no doubt there will be action. I call on the Minister to conclude the debate, thank him and wish him well in the major task ahead.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I begin by thanking all Members of the House for their very thought-through and meaningful contributions this afternoon and last week. It has been an extremely good and considered debate. It is clear that many Senators have taken the time to go through what is a huge report. It took me weeks to get through it all in detail. Many Senators today, such as Senator Ahearn and some Senators from Galway, picked on local homes such as the one in Tuam to focus on local issues, which in the immediate term are most apparent and meaningful to them. Everyone has reflected their gratitude to the Acting Chairperson for his contributions to this debate and the previous debate on the database. I reiterate that from the point of view of his shared experience here, our individual conversations and the kind of guidance he has been able to give me as a new Minister and new Deputy in this role.

I will try to address points made by individual Senators today, as I did last week. Obviously, I will be unable to cover everything in a great deal of detail. Senator Chambers began by saying

that redress and apology can never make good all the hurt that has been done to survivors. This is the understanding of the Government. The Government understands that the State failed survivors and allowed that relationship of trust to break. It was the State's fault and now the State offers the suite of measures outlined in the action plan as a step towards rebuilding that relationship. It will take a long time to rebuild that relationship for some survivors. We may never be able to entirely do that but we are setting out a range of actions for us to take. An apology, restorative recognition and legislation are all part of steps to rebuild that relationship. It was important that Senator Chambers mentioned the county homes and that only four county homes were fully investigated in the report as a representative sample. Indeed, the report identified that some of the worst conditions were in the county homes as opposed to necessarily being found in the mother and baby homes.

Senators Chambers, Crowe, Dolan and Kyne all referred to the apology of Galway County Council. We spoke about that briefly last week. I remember Senator Pauline O'Reilly also referred to it last week. That apology was really good and an important first step in rebuilding that local relationship of trust. I hope we see other local authorities take a similar approach.

Senators Chambers, Craughwell, Ardagh and Higgins spoke about the importance of the restorative recognition scheme and how it is so important that we get that right. Senators also said it is important that this is done quickly. There is a balance there. We want to get this right and learn from the mistakes of previous redress schemes. I am very conscious of that and that we need a human rights approach in the drafting of this particular scheme. I am also conscious of the age of many of the survivors. It is important that we make provision for them as quickly as possible.

Senator Conway referred to the responsibility and failure of the State in allowing the cruelties that are exhibited in this report occur to women and children. That, again, is a key emphasis of my response and that of the Government. We acknowledge the fault of the State; the State was at fault here. Irrespective of how certain elements are conveyed by certain parts of the report, this Government recognises the State's fault and we are acting to begin to make good the flaws of previous Governments and local authorities.

Senator Conway noted the importance of acting quickly on all 22 points. That was a theme in many Senators' contributions. I and the Government will be accountable for our success in implementing them and I, as line Minister, will be accountable to both Houses. I have no doubt I will be before the House regularly to discuss the various elements and how we are advancing on them. One of the other key elements is to have information and tracing legislation. We have made a commitment to bring the heads of a Bill at the end of March or in early April. That will give us an opportunity to pass this legislation well before the end of this year. From the point of view of legislation that will be highly technical, that is an ambitious timeframe that we have proposed. It is not a question of dusting down previous legislation. This is new legislation because we are taking an approach that is centred on the general data protection regulation, GDPR.

Senator Sherlock spoke of the need not to significantly limit those to whom redress will be given. Senator Hoey drew on that point as well. The Government took the important decision not to restrict the interdepartmental group which will design the redress scheme. The group can look beyond the three categories set out by the commission. That is important because I, too, would find it difficult to see the justification for taking 1973 and the introduction of the unmarried mother's allowance as an absolute cut-off point.

Senators Crowe and Craughwell both drew attention to the absolutely shocking figure of 9,000 children and babies who died in an institution. That is probably the most powerful and significant piece of knowledge that this report has delivered to us, not just that one raw figure but the numbers who died in individual institutions, including more than 1,000 in the Sean Ross mother and baby home and 900 in Bessborough. That brought home the realities of what happened in these institutions.

Senator Crowe also emphasised the importance of health supports, as did Senators Ó Donnghaile and Joe O'Reilly. Those are important. Counselling services are now in place through the national counselling service. Former residents of these institutions are a prioritised group within that, which means they do not have to go to the back of the queue. They are prioritised in availing of counselling, which is free and can be of a short, medium or long-term nature. A detailed and comprehensive suite of counselling has been put in place for former residents, which is important.

Senator Crowe and a number of other Senators mentioned the importance of ongoing engagement with survivors. I am very conscious of that. I have proposed two dates for meetings in February with the collaborative forum, as the representative body of survivors. We are arranging two meetings because we have an extensive range of issues to discuss. There will also be wider engagement with survivors. I look forward to hearing the views of the collaborative forum to get inspiration and ideas for how we should provide wider ongoing engagement with survivors. That is essential.

Senator Dolan made the very valid point that there is a large cohort of survivors who are not known to us and who suffer in silence having made the decision not to tell any member of their family. I can only imagine how traumatic and difficult the last number of days have been for them. Many survivors have groups around them to whom they can talk and who offer them support. For those who, for their own reasons, have taken the decision not to open up about this, we acknowledge that they are there and that this must be an incredibly hard time for them.

Senator Ó Donnghaile mentioned the Northern report which was published today. As he said, we have had engagement with the Executive. I met Judith Gillespie, who is leading that investigation, and the Minister of Health, Robin Swann, prior to Christmas. Last week, I had a very useful meeting with the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I offered any help that we could give to them in the context of the next steps they are taking. We agreed that there were many issues, in particular the cross-Border trade in children which went from North to South and *vice versa* and happened in Catholic and Protestant churches. We all agreed that taking a survivor-centred approach was absolutely critical.

Senator Ardagh spoke about the responsibilities of the congregations. As I said, I have begun that engagement with them and have sought a meeting with them to discuss the issue of apology, their contribution to the restorative recognition scheme and access to records. Senator Hoey mentioned the importance of access to church as well as State records.

Senator Martin referred to the importance of engagement with survivors. I mentioned my commitment to engage with the collaborative forum and wider engagement. I am very open to new ways of engaging with survivors and examining the models that have been adopted in other countries, as well as the idea of survivor advocates or something along those lines. I want to engage with the collaborative forum in the first place.

I have spoken with Senator Higgins on an individual basis on my Department's compatibility with GDPR in answering subject access requests. I and my officials will meet the Data Protection Commissioner on Thursday to discuss in detail the application of GDPR to our treatment of the archive. That is particularly important.

I note Senators Higgins and Byrne also mentioned direct provision as a more modern manifestation of State failure and the Government's commitment to end direct provision. I will bring forth a White Paper in February that will outline how we will end direct provision.

Senator Joe O'Reilly placed great importance on the range of information that we need to provide to survivors of these institutions. I have set out the measures involved, including information and tracing, and what my Department can provide when subject access requests come in regarding information contained in the commission archive. That will apply from 28 February.

Senator Joe O'Reilly also spoke very passionately about the issue of compulsion and the compulsion that was placed on women to enter these institutions and give their children up for adoption. Senator Hoey also spoke on that point. When I read the confidential committee chapter and other chapters it is clear to me that these women had absolutely no choice in the decision to enter an institution or give up their children. That is apparent to me and it is on that basis that I go forward.

Senators Byrne and Kyne emphasised the idea of a survivor-centred approach by my Department and other Government bodies, in particular Tusla. Tusla is very eager to act and implement subject access requests in a way that is compatible with GDPR.

Senator Kyne spoke very passionately about the misogyny that is rife across the report and was clearly rife in Irish society for so many decades. One of the key points was the way women were spoken about in institutions, government and local authorities and the contempt with which they were spoken to in many circumstances.

Senator Ahearn outlined the specific elements concerning the Sean Ross home and the very high infant mortality rates there. I remember being particularly taken by what Alice Lister, the Department inspector said. She spoke about the export of children from Sean Ross to the United States and said we were sending away our most beautiful, brightest and best children. She said how important it was for that process to stop.

Senator O'Loughlin recognised how many people we know in our lives who will have been directly impacted by this, in terms of having been a mother in an institution or having been adopted from one. Certainly, even in my own life I can think of three people who have been adopted and to whom I have been speaking over recent months about the various issues that spring from this report and getting their sense of how they feel about all that we have learned.

As Senator Craughwell has said, there can be no sense of an apology and moving on from this issue. I can assure him and all of the Senators that there will be no such sense. This is the first step in what will be a long process of the State seeking to rebuild that relationship of trust and to make it right with survivors. We are going to work as fast as we can to deliver the crucial elements, but I would be lying as Minister to say that all of the 22 action points will be done quickly. We will, however, act as fast as possible to deliver key things such as information and tracing and redress, and we have already delivered on comprehensive counselling. I will be accountable to this House and to the Dáil for the ongoing implementation.

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In using the words used at the beginning of this session, we believe survivors and we will now act to show, by implementing these actions following on from the State apology, that we believe survivors.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Minister. That concludes statements on the report of the mother and baby homes commission of investigation. The Seanad now stands adjourned as per the Order of the House today. When is it proposed for the House to sit again?

Senator Seán Kyne: The House will sit again at 11 a.m. on Monday, 1 February 2021 in the Dáil Chamber.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.22 p.m. until 11 a.m. on Monday, 1 February 2021.