



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé hAoine, 19 Feabhra 2021

Friday, 19 February 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 welcome the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, to the House. I thank him for taking time out from his busy schedule to take two of these important Commencement matters. If the Minister will bear with me, I will, under Standing Orders, read out the Commencement matters.

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

The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the backlog in driver theory tests and whether his Department will consider the introduction of online remote access theory testing.

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

The need for the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to allocate just transition funding to west Clare to offset the economic impact of the downsizing of Moneypoint power station.

I have also received notice from Senator Victor Boyhan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to indicate the timeline for the live roll-out of An Bord Pleanála's Plean-IT project together with its linking to local planning authorities' own e-planning initiative.

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

The need for the Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion to provide an update on the opening of Scoil Colm, Dublin 12, as an autism spectrum disorder, ASD, specific school.

I have also received notice from Senator Erin McGreehan of the following matter:

The need for Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion to make a statement on the plans being put in place to enable all children with special needs to return to school on a full-time basis.

I have also received notice from Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Foreign Affairs to outline the steps the Government is taking, together with the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and EU institutions, to expedite a bilateral or a joint programme of regulator-to-regulator mutual recognition of professional qualifications between the North and South of Ireland and Britain.

I have also received notice from Senators Gerard Craughwell and Vincent P. Martin of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Defence to make a statement on the independence of the recently appointed Jadotville independent review group.

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

The need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the timeline for completion of the M11 motorway from Oylegate to Rosslare Europort, County Wexford.

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide an update on the new main waste water scheme for east Galway city, previously referred to as the east Galway main drainage project.

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide funding to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council for harbours that were transferred to it under the Harbours Act 2015.

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

The need for the Minister for Education to provide an update on the delivery of a permanent extension to the Sacred Heart Secondary School, Clonakilty, County Cork.

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

The need for the Minister for Justice to provide an update on the new Garda station in Clonmel, County Tipperary.

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

The need for the Minister for Justice to make a statement on issues relating to the housing assistance payment, HAP, schemes and access to the courts through the civil legal aid scheme.

Of the matters raised by the Senators suitable for discussion, I have selected Senators Davitt, Dooley, Boyhan, Seery Kearney, McGreehan and Ó Donnghaile and they will be taken now. I regret that I had to rule out of order the matter raised by Senator Kyne 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

Driver Test

An Cathaoirleach: I again thank the Minister for coming into the House.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I thank the Cathaoirleach and I appreciate that he has selected this matter today. I welcome the Minister to the House. I know he has a busy portfolio and is very active in it. I wish him well in all his endeavours. I am sure the Minister is aware that there is quite a large backlog in relation to the theory test. This has been flagged to me by several councillors nationwide. Councillors Arthur McDonald and Paul Taylor have recently contacted me about clients who are trying to book a theory test. Some spots available were as late as November of this year. Following further inquiries, I believe there are 54,000 people booked to do theory tests between the middle of March and November.

There was talk of a pilot scheme to bring the driver theory test online. There is no reasonable excuse not to conduct the theory test online, particularly as the Covid crisis is lasting much longer than anticipated. Every other facet of Irish life has moved to Zoom, Teams and other formats. There is no reasonable excuse for the theory test not to be carried out online safely, securely and, most of all, to the benefit to the Irish road user.

I know there is a pilot scheme but we have had very little feedback on that. I ask the Minister, as the senior Minister in this Department, to think outside the box, come up with an answer and allow people who need transport for school, work and everyday life to take the test. If they do not have their theory test, they cannot progress to get their driver test. I am hopeful the Minister will have a positive response to this issue. It is not the first time I have flagged it with his office.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I thank the Senator for raising this matter. The driver theory test service is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority, RSA. My Department has been in constant contact with the authority since the start of the pandemic regarding all of its services. The impact of Covid-19 on these services and how they can best be maintained in the current circumstances is a critical issue for us. The driver theory test has not been deemed an essential service under level 5. As a consequence, the service is closed while level 5 restrictions remain in place. Candidates who have a theory test scheduled up to 5 March will be contacted via email with a rescheduled appointment.

Theory tests were first suspended due to Covid-19 in March last year. The service resumed on a gradual basis in mid-June. This was possible due to detailed work undertaken by the Road Safety Authority and its contractor, in conjunction with expert medical advice, to examine each aspect of the testing process and to ensure, to the maximum possible extent, the resumed test would be safe for the public.

When operations resumed there was, inevitably, an increased level of demand due to the consequent backlog. Unfortunately, due to social distancing and other public health and hygiene needs, service capacity was considerably reduced and customers experienced longer waiting times. Level 5 restrictions took effect again for six weeks from 22 October 2020 to 1 December last and were reinstated from the end of December. The service will remain closed until at least 5 March. While I fully appreciated the inconvenience this causes, I am sure the Senator will agree that limiting the spread of the virus and safeguarding public health takes priority.

The Road Safety Authority has advised it is engaging with the service provider to examine ways of increasing the number of tests, within the current health constraints, when services resume. In this regard, the aim is to double capacity over a three-month period. Subject to decisions on future Covid-19 restrictions, additional capacity would be made available in April, May and June 2021.

Given that normal capacity was approximately 25,000 tests per month, this initiative will provide an estimated 75,000 extra testing appointments over the three-month period, making substantial inroads into the numbers waiting. My Department has requested that the Road Safety Authority, as the body legally responsible for the driver theory test, examine whether theory tests can be taken remotely online, and what is needed to do so.

I am pleased to inform Senator Davitt the driver theory test service has launched a pilot phase of a new initiative, which offers a remote testing service for specific categories of theory test. During the pilot phase, remote testing will be available on a limited basis. Extra capacity will be added as it is rolled out to allow more customers to sit their bus or truck certificate of professional competency or advanced driver instruction theory test online.

Remote testing allows candidates to test from their homes or another suitable environment, once the minimum requirements for the service have been met. Following a review of the private phase, the RSA expects the initiative to be extended to cars and motorcycles. The RSA is keen to extend the service to all categories of driver theory test. However, scaling up operations to facilitate higher numbers will take time to achieve. As remote testing facilitates additional capacity while also enabling the service to continue in the event of future lockdowns, it is expected to greatly reduce the service to normal waiting times.

The Department has been in discussions with the Road Safety Authority on how to return to the normal target for the maximum waiting time. It will not be possible to arrive at this quickly, given the restraints which must be put in place due to Covid-19. It is important to recognise there are no quick fixes and the continuing build-up of applications as the pandemic goes on means it will take time to return to normal waiting times. It is important to emphasise that an extension of the level 5 restrictions, currently in place until 5 March, will impact on how quickly the backlog plan can be delivered.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I am delighted to hear the scheme the Minister had introduced on a pilot basis has been a success. However, we are more than a year into this pandemic. There will probably be changes for another year. It would be a step forward to have the theory test online and to have an adequate system so that people could do it online. It would make more sense going forward.

I question the preparation the RSA has put into this. How did it not see this staring it in the face a year ago and why did it not work on this a bit harder? How can the system not be rolled

out when every other facet of Irish society has managed to move on? It is a necessity. I ask the Minister to stress to the RSA that this be made a priority. Driving examiners are at home. Why can they not look at the theory end? We have the manpower. If these examiners are only carrying out tests on a very limited basis, or not at all, at present, they could be used to help get the theory end out of the way.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Senator. The Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, is the line Minister in this regard but I will work with her. I have a meeting coming up with the RSA and I will impress on it the imperative to get the remote system working not only for bus and truck drivers, but also for car drivers. We had a meeting of the Covid subcommittee last night. Unfortunately, the advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, which is good advice, is that we will probably have to continue with level 5 restrictions past 5 March. Everyone is aware of that. This remote testing system was introduced in December and has worked well. It will take some time to set it up more widely but the Senator is right, there is an imperative to do so. I will make sure we do everything we can within the Department to help the RSA to deliver.

Just Transition Fund

Senator Timmy Dooley: This House is well aware of the significance of the power generation facility at Moneypoint in west Clare and of the impact it has had on the economy of the country and on the growth and strengthening of the economy of County Clare. It has now been in operation for 34 years. It was commissioned in 1987, construction having started in 1979. It has had a very significant impact over those 42 years. There is no doubt that it secured the State's electricity supply, helping in no small way with the growth of the Irish economy out of the doldrums of the late 1980s. As I have said, it also strengthened the economy of County Clare. From the start of construction in 1979, hundreds of people were employed. Hundreds more were employed by the fledgling station. The number employed in the operation of the electricity generating facility grew to approximately 300 at its peak. All the while, contractors and external companies also provided labour to the facility. Approximately 600 people worked in the facility at its peak. People moved to the area from other parts of the country and locals were spared the outlet of emigration. Communities such as those in the major town in the west of Clare, Kilrush, in Milltown Malbay and in villages such as Kilmihil, Kilkee, Cooraclare and Lissycasey all grew and were strengthened. People settled in these areas and those communities were protected. There is scarcely a village in County Clare in which there is not someone who worked in Moneypoint at some point. It was a real driver of the local economy.

The Minister, given his expertise, will certainly know how climate change has changed everything, as do we all. Our recognition of the harmful effects of the CO₂ emissions from the burning of coal has changed our outlook and the way we live our lives. It has, however, been a key plank of the Minister's policies and those of Fianna Fáil that the communities that have invested a great deal in infrastructure that is now not climate-friendly must be assisted. Nowhere needs this assistance more than Moneypoint and the west Clare area. I ask the Minister to extend just transition funding to meet the needs of those communities that, at the direction of the State, built their lives, had their families, built their homes and set their dreams and aspirations in the villages and towns in this area. We cannot allow the area to become a parked-up rust belt. We know what happens when policies like that are allowed to prevail. We saw what happened in the United States when states moved away from coal extraction and steel working.

We saw the impact that had on the democracy of that country when some sought to play with it. I do not want to see the same thing happen here. I want these people to be provided with the real supports they now need.

The communities need just transition funding. The Minister will know that €77 million has been provided by the European Union for the period between 2021 and 2027. I want the money extended to that area. I also want to see the ESB play a greater role. The reality is that it has shrouded its plans in mystery and secrecy. The plant was supposed to close in 2025, but that has been brought forward because of the way electricity is now priced and the emergence of much more wind energy. The numbers have reduced dramatically. There are probably fewer than 100 people working there from a peak of 600 combined workers. We need to act now. The ESB needs to have an action plan to look to the potential of the plant to capture wind energy off the western seaboard and to see if there is potential to have a gas generation system for electricity with carbon capture and storage. As a State, we need to provide the appropriate funding to help those communities to transition from the burning of coal to finding more opportunities in the green energy sector in particular.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I welcome the opportunity to set out the actions being taken by the Government in response to the announcement of the downsizing of the Moneypoint power station in west Clare. The programme for Government committed to achieving an average reduction of 7% per annum in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030. This remains a key objective for the Government, and the changes to electricity generation within Moneypoint form part of the steps required to meet this goal.

The 2019 climate action plan also committed to ending the burning of coal at Moneypoint by 2025 at the latest and to the replacement of coal-fired generation with low-carbon and renewable technologies. This remains the objective of the updated climate action plan, due to be released later this year.

The national just transition fund was established in mid-2020 to respond to the immediate closure of the ESB-owned power stations in Lanesborough, County Longford, and Shannonbridge, County Offaly, and to support affected communities in the region with the transition from employment in peat harvesting. As a result of this direct focus, eight of the most affected counties were eligible to submit funding applications to the 2020 just transition fund.

The Government has announced provisional funding offers totalling almost €30 million under the just transition fund to more than 60 projects throughout the region for projects from the private sector, local authorities and communities in the midlands that are committed to creating a green and sustainable economy for the region. This will contribute to making the midlands an attractive and sustainable place to live and work, including by funding training and reskilling so local businesses and communities can adjust to a low-carbon transition.

Looking ahead to future just transition supports, the European green deal has led to the establishment of a new EU just transition fund whose objective will be to alleviate the socio-economic impacts of the low-carbon transition in the most affected regions across the EU. This fund may be used to support the reskilling of workers, help SMEs to create new economic opportunities, and promote the diversification of economic activity towards low-carbon sectors and progress towards achieving the EU's 2030 climate targets and a climate neutral economy by 2050.

Ireland must prepare a territorial just transition plan, for approval by the European Commission, in order to secure access to supports from this new EU fund. The territorial plan will set out our investment priorities and will identify the sectors and regions to be supported. Part of my Department's work to prepare this territorial plan will include identification of the most affected regions based on the requirements and criteria of the relevant EU regulations. I envisage that this work will be completed this summer.

Separately, as part of the renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, it is a requirement that renewable electricity generation projects that gain support establish a community benefit fund for the distribution of benefits to local communities. Under the first RESS auction it is expected that these funds could amount to more than €4 million per year for local communities across the country. These benefit funds will give local communities the ability to fund worthy sustainable development initiatives as well as fund local clubs and societies that the community deems worthy of support. These funds will be vital in ensuring that communities that host the electricity generation projects of the future retain the benefits locally.

I am aware of a number of projects in counties Clare and Limerick that were successful in the first RESS auction last September and communities in the vicinity of those projects will begin to see the benefits of that funding in the coming years. With the abundant natural renewable resources in west Clare, and offshore, I expect to see further projects coming through later RESS auctions with a resulting increase in funding through local community benefit funds throughout the mid-west region. In the longer term, the Government is planning major investment in offshore wind resources in the Atlantic Ocean, bringing economic benefits to the mid-western region including through development of ports and reusing existing grid infrastructure. My Department is carrying out a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems, focusing on the period to 2030 in the context of a sustainable pathway to 2050. This review will consider a range of options to enhance the security of supply, including sources of electricity generation for use in the event of a shortage of natural gas.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I welcome the clarification that, at least, the ESB is looking at the classification of the plant. The reality is that will probably require approximately 30 employees. However, compared with the height of having 600 employees at the plant, it is no compensation for the wider community. Yet again, it protects the State's requirement to have a back-up electricity supply. What we need is targeted investment under the just transition fund and a portion of the €77 million that has been provided by the EU to support the communities that have already lost very significant amounts of income as a result of the way in which the ESB had to downsize its operations at Moneypoint. It is important that funding is put in place to ensure there is gainful employment. I look forward to proposals and plans for developing offshore wind energy projects, but the experts have indicated that such projects are probably ten years away. We need to protect these communities and bridge the gap between now and ten years hence when there is expected to be potential employment in that area.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I referred to the 2019 climate action plan. In truth, we will have to be more ambitious in many different areas such as agriculture and transport, but also in energy. One of the areas where things will probably advance more quickly than was set out in the plan is that of power generation. While preparing my response to the Senator, I noted that the price of carbon today is almost €40 per tonne. At that price, Moneypoint does not operate. It is outside the merit order. It does not make economic sense. As such, the 2025 deadline is increasingly irrelevant in the context of what the reality is.

The Deputy was partly correct with regard to offshore development being ten years away. Later this year or early next year, we will start auctions for offshore wind on the east coast, but we will not have to wait ten years to start in deeper waters elsewhere and to look at the prospects of floating wind turbines and so on. It will take a long time. These projects are huge. The turbines we will be putting out from the Shannon Estuary into the Atlantic will be far higher than the chimneys at Moneypoint. People in the area know how dominant those chimneys are. The jobs to which the Senator referred, which were created in the late 1970s and 1980s during the construction of the Moneypoint station, will be a fraction of the jobs that will be available not only in the deployment, maintenance and management of that new energy system, but also the jobs that will be created in the context of the use of the power as it comes back in. The real prospect here is not just building energy generation in Moneypoint and elsewhere in County Clare, but bringing the industry to where the power is. That is the prospect that holds out real opportunity and it is why we should be quicker and more ambitious, rather than just accepting existing plans.

An Bord Pleanála

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, to the House. He will not be a stranger to this topic. I am endeavouring to again raise the issue of two e-planning or online planning systems. One of those systems, entitled Plean-IT, is being championed and is supposed to be promoted by An Bord Pleanála. Let us deal with a few facts
11 o'clock with regard to the 2016 programme for Government and the current programme for Government. All present are aware that, in spite of a few sceptics, Rebuilding Ireland remains Government policy. When it was published in 2016, it contained an absolute commitment that the Plean-IT project would be rolled out.

I had a look at the subsequent Estimates in Dáil Éireann relating to successive budgets, and I see that substantial moneys have been given to An Bord Pleanála. I also saw that money was invested in capital projects, almost €1 million in the past two years. However, the slow progress on the part of An Bord Pleanála in the context of information technology is exceptionally disappointing.

I also wish to raise the issue of e-planning across the 31 local authorities. I believe in checking out these systems myself, so I rang An Bord Pleanála yesterday. I asked whether if I wanted to inspect the report of a chief executive of a planning authority online, I could do so. I was not referring to a current report, but one in respect of which a decision had been determined. I made that inquiry because, as the Minister of State knows, transparency is very important in the planning process. I was informed, quite frankly, that the information is not available online because An Bord Pleanála does not have the capacity to do that yet. I then posed a question as to how a person in Claremorris, County Clare, with an issue in respect of a strategic housing development would be able to see the relevant information. I was told that the person would first have to make an appointment with An Bord Pleanála. Given the situation with Covid-19, and I fully appreciate all the restrictions in place because of concern for public health, I was told that it would be necessary to make an appointment, come up on a bus and then look at a hard copy of the information. The information required is available, so it is not an issue of retaining or shutting down the documentation.

Those of us in Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann who represent rural constituencies and

areas should really be starting to wake up. We have a legislative duty. A programme for Government was drawn up some time ago, and the Rebuilding Ireland policy refers to an absolute commitment regarding the rolling out of the Plean-IT system. The system as it stands is lacking. The impact of Covid-19 is a restriction and the difficulty in this regard. I rang several planning authorities and I was told that they are shut but that, in limited circumstances, they could arrange for people to come in by appointment. Those planning authorities are open but are operating under very tight restrictions.

The nature of our planning process means that it is vital that people should be able to see draft county development plans, new plans and local area plans. All such plans should be available and this is an important point. I want to inject a new impetus into getting An Bord Pleanála fully online. If the onset of Covid-19 has taught us one thing, it is that when we are put under pressure and are forced to engage with technology, then we embrace it. I have travelled a long way in IT in the past six months as a result of Covid-19. I resisted all sorts of measures and initiatives previously, but I am now doing Zoom calls and all of the other online bits and pieces. When the pressure is on and when we have the hunger and desire to get information, we go after it and we use whatever means and mediums are open to us.

For the Minister of State's benefit, I have sent him some of the details I have not been able to cover here. There is a commitment in Rebuilding Ireland to roll out An Bord Pleanála's Plean-IT system. We should have a compatible e-planning system around the country, because we want to engage and encourage rather than frustrate people involved in this process. There have been particular concerns regarding the strategic housing development scheme, but hopefully that is going to end soon anyway. We must open up the planning process, however, and allow people to engage with technology.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I thank Senator Boyhan for raising this important issue, which is also close to my heart, and for giving me the opportunity to update the Seanad on progress in the roll-out of the Plean-IT project upgrading the IT system operated by An Bord Pleanála and the Local Government Management Agency's e-planning project.

The operation of an efficient, up-to-date and fit-for-purpose planning system which facilitates easier public engagement and participation in the planning process is a key priority for my Department. The development and roll-out of An Bord Pleanála's major IT transformation project, Plean-IT, is a significant initiative aimed at facilitating applications, appeals and submissions to be made online and it is moving into its next phase of development, linking in with the separate e-planning initiative to be operated by the local planning authorities.

In this regard, An Bord Pleanála introduced an online facility to accept public observations relating to strategic housing development applications, together with the required fee, in November. The online facility is currently in operation, but for those cases only. An Bord Pleanála intends to use its experience with this initial pilot project to inform its development of similar facilities and arrangements for other case types, including other strategic infrastructure development cases and planning appeals and it is intended to advance these in 2021. Details of the pilot project arrangements are available on An Bord Pleanála's website, www.pleanala.ie.

An Bord Pleanála is also in the process of finalising the development of a new, upgraded website which will be more user-friendly and informative than the current one. The new website will make it easier for members of the public to view and monitor the progress of files and is

scheduled to go live before the end of the first quarter of 2021. This will further help to improve communications and interaction between An Bord Pleanála and the public.

The Local Government Management Agency is managing and co-ordinating the development of the e-planning project, on behalf of my Department, to which the Department is providing significant funding towards the start-up costs. The e-planning project, which is currently being developed, seeks to integrate the information technology, IT, systems of the 31 planning authorities using a single online portal that allows for the online submission of planning applications, appeals, submissions and associated fees. Once it has been fully rolled out, e-planning will provide an online option for the public to engage with the planning system, in addition to the paper-based system.

The experience of operating the planning system during the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of having the most up-to-date and modern technology in place. It has also highlighted the role that online technology will make to the more effective and efficient operation of the planning system in the future, as has been alluded to by Senator Boyhan.

Arising from the experience over the last 11 months, the e-planning project board has been requested by my Department to accelerate the development and roll-out of the new e-planning system nationwide with a view to bringing the system on stream as speedily as possible. The proposed system is now in its final stages of development and testing, further to which it is envisaged that e-planning will be launched in a number of planning authorities during the next quarter and, subsequently, rolled out to all other local authorities on a phased basis by the end of the second quarter of 2022.

It is important that this issue has been raised by Senator Boyhan. Both of us have spoken at length about public engagement in the planning system. In the spirit of the Aarhus Convention, the public participation directive, we have a great opportunity now to give those who probably would not ordinarily have a voice, or an input, into the planning system the option to do so by facilitating increased and enhanced access to online portals. I welcome this Commencement matter being brought forward.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive reply. On 29 October 2020, the policy document entitled the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future was published. It talked about planning reform, supporting the planning regulator and IT technologies, which is important. We need to push it on and Covid has brought technology more to the fore.

Last week, I made a trip to the office of An Bord Pleanála to deliver two objections for two people because I could not do them online. I went to the post office on Merrion Row and with my own money took out two €50 postal orders for observations. Then I walked to Marlborough Street where I pressed a doorbell of an office and was told to stick them in the cardboard box as they could not validate them. I said that it was a shame that the people for whom I delivered the objections could not do this online. We do not have the facility, which is a poor show in 2021.

Before I came in here, I conducted a word search of the national planning framework and discovered that neither the term “Plean-IT”, which is the big An Bord Pleanála portal that the Minister of State talked about, or the term “e-planning” was mentioned once. Perhaps when we are talking about that document we could incorporate those two objectives and ambitions in the document.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: The Senator has made useful suggestions. I will take on board the useful note that he provided to me. We know our city and county development plans are now aligned and moving in the same trajectory. I attended an open session on Kilkenny County Council's heritage plan, which was really fantastic. Members of the public have been drawn into an online portal, *consult.kilkenny.ie*, which is well worth a look. It is a good exemplar of what can be done in these times, particularly with regard to the level of engagement. Previously, we would have had public meetings that might have had a trickle of people into them but at that particular event there were over 70 participants. The initiative is a fantastic opportunity. It is an opportunity that we need to take out of Covid and bring to us. We need to keep using it as a default way to enhance transparency, accessibility and participation in the planning system.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pauline O'Reilly): I thank the Minister of State for joining us today.

Special Educational Needs

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I thank the Minister of State for coming before the House so quickly again. I very much appreciate that she was only here last week listening to us speak about exactly the same topics. As she will be aware, a group of parents have mounted a valiant campaign in Dublin 12 to see the opening of a school locally for the provision of autism-specific classes and supports. Very early in the Minister of State's tenure she met with them, and I know a considerable amount of work went into ensuring that the Scoil Colm that was there, which was ready to go, could be opened and equipped. This situation arose because the enrolment policies surrounding ASD classes are not community-specific or specific to the local community and, as a consequence, there were exceptionally long waiting lists in Dublin 12 because the surrounding areas of Dublin 6W and so on do not have classes. The Minister of State is always patient and tolerant in listening to me go on and on about this. I am passionate about it because I will never get over the meeting last year with Involve Autism and the sheer sadness of the parents that evening.

The Minister of State made a fantastic announcement at Christmas and I know it came on foot of an awful lot of background work on her part and on the part of her officials. We now know that the school opening is due for September of this year. I acknowledge fully the engagement of the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, and the Minister of State's most recent update that enrolment, staffing and so on are being contemplated. However, those parents who have advocated most for this are very anxious to know the specific details of the opening. Some are very anxious to get in and have a look at the facility and to see whether there is anything to be done, anything that can be done in the interim and anything that can be done to assist, to hurry this up and to ensure they will have places for their children in the coming school year, if not beforehand. As we know, autism is not limited to a specific demographic. It is really important to say that if we have this in Dublin 12, it will take the pressure from other areas and then, it is to be hoped, we will be able to concentrate and work on other areas, as I know the Minister of State has been doing. We have had great strides forward, and I very much appreciate her work on that. Anything she can tell us or update us in detail on regarding the opening of Scoil Colm will be very much appreciated.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I thank Senator Seery Kearney for raising this important matter. She raises it consistently with me. She

raised it last week and I did not answer because there were so many other questions that there was not enough time. I am delighted to have the opportunity today.

Enabling children with special educational needs, SEN, to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government and always has been. I was very pleased to have secured agreement on a new special school on the site of Scoil Colm. This is a much-needed development which will help to meet the demand for special school places in the area, as the Senator said. Since my appointment I have met with a wide range of representative associations and advocates for the special education sector. All these groups, including Involve Autism, have raised very important issues as to how they consider that improvements can be made to special education services. Among these groups were local campaigners for a special school in Dublin 12 such as Involve Autism, whom I met along with Senator Seery Kearney and other public representatives. I pay tribute to the work of these campaigners for their dedication to this project and the educational welfare of young people in the area. We know there has been a need, as the Senator pointed out, for an additional special school in the area, and I was determined to take action to rectify this. By working closely with school authorities, the patron body, officials, public representatives and the NCSE, we secured agreement on the use of the site, and I was delighted to approve the establishment of the new school just before Christmas of last year.

The NCSE has identified that appropriate provision is currently required for approximately 40 special school places for students with autism and general learning disabilities in the south Dublin area. This provision is required to be made available from the beginning of this year, that is, the 2021-22 school year. While the initial provision of 40 placements is intended to provide for those students identified by the NCSE, it is also intended that the available places will be used to meet the needs of other children with complex needs in the area. The Senator's particular question was around what is happening at the moment. The arrangements for the establishment of the new school are in train in consultation with the school patron, the Archbishop of Dublin, and the NCSE, and further information will be provided in advance of the opening. The NCSE will determine the staffing level for the school in line with normal procedures. My Department will also consider whatever other supports, including funding and training, are necessary to ensure the school is in a position to cater for the needs of these students upon enrolment. I assure the Senator that the necessary arrangements are being progressed as speedily as possible.

This new school will be a positive addition to the local area and we will ensure it is fully supported. We hope to open the school in September. If there is any possibility of doing so prior to that, we will certainly try but it will be open by September. The building does need to be prepared and teachers recruited. As I said, there is ongoing work with the NCSE around that. I am struck by what the Senator said about autism not being limited to a demographic. Indeed it is not and there are other areas around the country where special schools are required, and we always try to collaborate with existing schools to see if there is a way of expanding those schools. If not, we will always build special schools. I was very pleased that one of the first commitments I secured as a dedicated Minister of State for this area was a commitment from the building and planning area that from this year all new schools will automatically provide SEN facilities and classrooms. That is going to be important into the future so we do not have this issue happening perennially.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I very much appreciate the Minister of State's response. From the moment she took office, nobody could doubt the priority she placed on this issue or

her passion. I recall that within a couple of weeks she had facilitated a number of meetings for me. I really appreciate it. I acknowledge the considerable work done, particularly by Ms Margaret Lowndes of the D12 autism-specific school campaign, because she beat that drum very loudly for a long time. I join her in excitement at seeing this come to fruition.

It is important for us to hear about the breakdown of classes. Are those 40 places in that specific school? Is it going to be across different classes? Covid is a difficulty here but they are anxious to have a look at how the parents are being selected. Will the children of those who campaigned secure places?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: As the Senator will appreciate, it is a co-located shared campus with Scoil Eoin which already has 132 pupils. Scoil Colm is envisaged as catering for 40 students at the outset and it is hoped more thereafter. The intricacies and the finer details are being discussed at present, but I assure the Senator it is ongoing. There is quite a lot of work to do. We have been straitjacketed by Covid to a certain extent, not just with Scoil Colm and Scoil Eoin but in other areas of education, and it has been extremely difficult even to get on-site inspections done around the country. However, work on this is ongoing and should be done in a timely basis and definitely by September at the latest. As I said, if we can possibly do it before that we will. There are always increases in population as well as an exponential growth in autism around the country. I am determined that we will cater for these needs wherever they are situated. I thank the Senator again for her passion and interest in this particular area.

Covid-19 Pandemic

Senator Erin McGreehan: It is good to see the Minister of State here. We all very much appreciate her time. I asked for this Commencement matter because of the frustration and worry of parents of children with special needs and those of children with additional needs. The Minister of State is well aware they are at their wits' end. Parents are seeing their children's development regress. The ability of these children to behave socially has been affected and they are struggling to cope. The stories I have heard are devastating.

We were all very glad to hear the announcement that special needs classes and schools would be reopening and I wholeheartedly commend the Minister of State's incredibly hard work and dedication on this matter. However, the phased method, with one day on and one day off and two days in school one week and three the following week, is not sustainable for many students. It is causing havoc for some children. Some do not have the same understanding of time and it is difficult for them to understand why their bus comes one day and not the next when they are used to going to school on a five-day basis. I know that it is the goal of the Government to get these children back into full-time education but what is troubling for many is that they do not know when so-called normality will resume.

I appreciate that the Government is working hard to reopen schools sooner. These schools are deemed an essential service. These classes and schools provide much more than education and only time and retrospection will inform us of the full damage these closures have caused. There has already been compelling research on the damage caused to our children and particularly our special needs children.

One parent of a child with special educational needs has said that the child cannot cope with attending school for one day, followed by a long mid-term break and possible disruption in

routine. Another parent is facing the issue of her child being totally confused and upset by the starting and stopping. Another parent has found her son very upset on his days off and feels that online learning is making him worse. A child with special needs has been put on medication to help with anxiety levels and behaviour because of the lockdowns and not being able to go to school. Since returning to school this year, his medication had to be increased as returning to school one day a week was completely out of his routine. Another parent is dealing with a child who is very settled on the days he is in school but very disruptive on days off. I have also heard from parents of children attending special needs classes in schools that are being asked to do a phased reopening. Has this been permitted in the guidance and is it up to each school to decide?

Issues are coming up for parents whose children are to return to school next week. One child will return to his ASD unit on Monday but only from 9 a.m. to 10.40 a.m., even though the child usually attends from 9 a.m. until 2.40 p.m. Many parents are being offered shorter days, which is not a full return to education. Are there guidelines or medical evidence that state this is best practice? It goes without saying that the situation is strained for parents, children and teachers. I understand and appreciate that.

Where do children with additional needs feature in the scheme of returning to education? What extra resources will be put in place for them when they return to school?

In summary, I want to know when special needs schools and classes will return to full capacity. I worry for many families, particularly children who have been out of school and society and have not been reaching their potential for a long time. They have not been comfortable in their own skins and abilities because of the school closures. Parents are tired, as the Minister of State knows well because she has been at the front line. I would like to give these families and children some answers.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Senator for her question. My Department and I are very conscious of the fact that closing schools has hugely adverse consequences at individual, family and societal level and that the effect on children with special educational needs can be even greater, as we all know. It is my strong preference and that of the Minister, Deputy Foley, that all students would return to school at the earliest opportunity in March in line with public health advice.

Under the framework recently agreed with teacher unions and school management, an initial phased return of children in special schools and special classes is already under way, with children in special schools returning on a 50% basis, as the Senator spoke about, from 11 February and children in special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools making a full return from next Monday, 22 February.

Dialogue is continuing with education partners at primary and post-primary levels about a full reopening of schools. This has been informed by engagement with the Department of Health, whose analysis of the current disease levels has advised that a cautious phased approach should continue to be developed, which is what has happened thus far. The Department has reaffirmed its view that schools in and of themselves are low-risk environments. We also know this from NPHE's advice, from Dr. Abigail Collins and Dr. Kevin Kelleher and, indeed, from Dr. Philip Nolan, who has always maintained that schools are safe environments once they put in place their own infection control measures, which needs to be done. This approach will see schools reopening in line with public health advice and will ensure that all schools can reopen safely at the earliest opportunity in March.

We recognise that remote learning is particularly challenging for students with complex needs and because of this, the Department of Education has also put in place a supplementary programme to support the education and-or care needs of students with complex needs at primary and post-primary level. This programme of in-person support is intended to supplement the teaching and learning provided by the student's school and alleviate the impact of this period of school closure through the provision of five hours per week of in-person teaching or care support, to be delivered in homes for up to four weeks. There is support available. We recognise that it is not sufficient but it is something to try to help tackle this regression.

I am struck by what the Senator said about anxiety and behaviour, and the fact that some children have had to increase their medication, which is not what anybody wants. She spoke of families being at their wits' end and being devastated. I am equally devastated that we cannot do this. If I had a magic wand I would have all children back in school from today or tomorrow but that is simply not possible. We are dealing with many constituent parts within the education sector and we also have to take public health advice into account. Everybody is working towards this continued phased reopening. As I said, we have already had some success in the special schools, even if they are at 50% capacity. We hope to get them to 100% as soon as is practical and possible. It is important that all children get their education in person and in a school environment because this situation is extremely difficult for everybody. The Senator can rest assured that I and the Government are determined to reopen schools for students once it is fully safe to do so and once we have the agreement of all our education partners.

Senator Erin McGreehan: I know that if the Minister of State could click her fingers we would have all our children back to school. Part of my thought process on this issue is about special classes. There is a very individual, school-level approach to the reduction of the hours being provided. What do parents do if they are told they are supposed to get their child back to full-time education when they are not getting that? One hour and 40 minutes, which is what they will have next week, is certainly not full time for special classes. I ask the Minister of State to work on that and see if there is a way to get around it. If there is a school issue can the school contact the Department to see what it should do? Is there extra help to make sure there are full classes back at school next week?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: It is important to note that guidance has gone out to all schools on how they should be catering for children with special educational needs. Some of the requirements set out are: regular engagement with pupils and students; a blend of guided and independent learning tasks; appropriate and engaging learning opportunities; and two-way feedback between home and school. There are supports in place, as well as supports from the National Council for Special Education. It is clearly a relationship between all parties. It is up to the schools to decide how they administer the 50% capacity. We cannot be too prescriptive and schools and their principals, teachers and SNAs know best how they can work out a 50% phased approach. We ask for fairness in that regard. The guidance is set out very clearly until we can get back to 100% reopening and, indeed, until we get special educational needs classes in mainstream, regular education back, which we intend to do as soon as possible.

Qualifications Recognition

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach agus leis an Aire Stáit fosta as an gceist seo a ghlacadh. Tá a fhios agam go mbeidh mórán eolais

aige agus aitheantais tugtha aige freisin don ábhar seo agus do na fadhbanna atá ann fós maidir leis. The Minister of State will know that mutual recognition of professional qualifications is a live issue. I appreciate that and also that the matter is still being negotiated and discussed at committee level. The Minister of State will also appreciate and understand the uncertainty that prevails about this issue and the need to get it resolved.

Brexit has taken many rights and entitlements away from us. One area on which we were steadfast, sure and assertive was the need to protect the common travel area, CTA. Mutual recognition of professional qualifications is part and parcel of that. One of the Irish Government's key commitments, supported right across political, civic and business life here, was the very clear and firm need to defend and uphold the Good Friday Agreement, protect citizens' rights and, crucially in this instance, protect the all-Ireland economy. If qualifications are not being mutually recognised, North and South and between these islands, it has the potential to cause harm to our economy and could have a real impact on workers and businesses and those who hope to plan a better professional future for themselves. The matter, as the Minister of State will see, is straightforward. I appreciate him coming to the House to take this Commencement matter. It is important and timely to get an update from the Government on the status of this issue and, more important, how it sees it developing.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach agus leis an Seanadóir Ó Donnghaile as an ábhar tábhachtach seo a ardú ag tús imeachtaí an tSeanaid.

North-South co-operation, as we all agree, is an integral part of the Good Friday Agreement and a priority for the Government. It is protected under the protocol on Ireland-Northern Ireland. The protocol's recognition of the role of North-South co-operation is important. It is also a recognition of the importance of strand two of the Good Friday Agreement and of the way lives are led and business is conducted on the island of Ireland. The mapping exercise of North-South co-operation undertaken by the UK and EU provided valuable information on its breadth and depth. It confirmed that many areas have either expressly relied upon or been significantly enabled by the overarching EU legal and policy framework.

The context for North-South co-operation has unfortunately now changed. We will continue to work hard to find new ways of working in the areas where the underlying EU law no longer applies in Northern Ireland. The recognition of professional qualifications is one of a number of cross-cutting issues that impact on North-South co-operation. Unfortunately, it has been affected by the UK's withdrawal from the EU, as the Senator acknowledged, and is also important in the context of the common travel area. The Government is fully committed to the CTA and remains in close contact with UK authorities to ensure its smooth operation.

As of 1 January 2021, mutual recognition of professional qualifications, as laid down in EU Directive 2013/55/EU, no longer applies with regard to the UK. The recognition of qualifications has formed a key part of the Government's Brexit preparations, with a view to mitigating the challenges, where possible, and has been led by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Department, in collaboration with the British Government, has encouraged regulatory authorities in Ireland, a small number of which operate on an all-island basis, to engage with their UK counterparts to manage the process of continued recognition of UK qualifications in national law in Ireland. Departments, together with their regulators, have confirmed that in the majority of cases arrangements are in place to ensure continued recognition of professional qualifications. Individuals who have already had

their qualifications recognised by the relevant EU regulator before the end of the transition period will experience no change and can continue to practise in Ireland or elsewhere in the EU. Those who attain their qualifications after the end of the transition period will need to take the necessary steps to get their qualifications recognised in the other jurisdiction, as per the agreed regulator-to-regulator approach.

We recommend that anyone with a question about the process should contact the regulator. There certainly are a small number of sectors in respect of which further work is required or where primary EU law regarding certain regulated professions requires establishment or residence in the EU member state. The EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement also foresees a mechanism whereby the EU and the UK may later agree, on a case-by-case basis and for specific professions, on additional arrangements for the mutual recognition of certain professional qualifications. We look forward to and will work towards further progress on this important work.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Go raibh maith agat as an eolas cuimsitheach sin. As I said at the beginning of my remarks, I appreciate that this is a movable feast at the minute, and that the Minister of State is in the midst of it. What is crucial and important for the people affected is that they hear an update from the Government. However, going forward, beyond the details of what the Minister of State is suggesting, as welcome as that is, it is vital that the Government assures people it is doing everything in its power to mitigate the worst excesses of Brexit, and this is one of those excesses of Brexit. I know there is an EU-UK meeting next Wednesday. I ask the Minister of State to commit, on behalf of the Government, to a comprehensive effort to establish bilateral agreements, where necessary, to ensure that issues like this around the mutual recognition of professional qualifications are maintained, recognised and upheld, and that we do not heap even further injustice, unnecessary denial and removal of rights onto people where they do not need to be.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I have taken strong note of what the Senator has said on what is a really important issue. There are huge challenges for citizens across a number of sectors, North and South, with regard to the all-island economy. We all agree that those problems caused by Brexit require solutions. We have solutions to some problems, such as the CTA, and we have a trade agreement with Britain which resolves some problems but does not resolve every problem. The protocol is the solution to the problem of Brexit. Brexit is a problem for us - there are no two ways about it - and it is a problem for a number of professionals. This is a priority for the Government, however, and it will work to support ongoing work between the European Union and the UK in this context.

Individuals concerned can take note of the current measures for the recognition of professional qualifications and they can contact the regulatory bodies as issues arise. Regulatory bodies have been asked to do this work, and I know they are co-operating and doing as much as they can. The co-operation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland on an all-island basis remains an important priority, including the new transition context. It is a central part of the Good Friday Agreement and it is essential for achieving reconciliation, social development and economic progress on the island of Ireland.

Sitting suspended at 11.38 a.m. and resumed at 12 noon.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Regina Doherty: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the arrangements for the sitting of the House on Monday, 22 February 2021, to be taken without debate on the conclusion of the Order of Business; No. 2, motion on the Planning and Development (Exempted Development) Regulations 2021, to be taken without debate on the conclusion of No. 1; No. 3, motion on the Planning and Development (Exempted Development) (No. 2) Regulations 2021, to be taken without debate on the conclusion of No. 2; No. 4, statements on the report of the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes (resumed), to be taken at 1.30 p.m. and to conclude at 3 p.m., with the contributions of all Senators not to exceed six minutes, and the Minister to be given not less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 5, Student Nurses (Pay) Bill 2021 - Second Stage, to be taken at 3.15 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I agree with the Order of Business. This morning we heard the confirmed news that Ulster Bank is to wind down its operation in the Republic of Ireland after 160 years of banking in the State. My sympathy and my heart go out to all of the 2,800 staff who work in the 88 branches and to the more than 1 million customers who bank with Ulster Bank. It is a worrying development for the banking sector in Ireland. Effectively, it means that we have a duopoly in commercial business loans. We now have a situation whereby a bank that has 15% of the mortgage market in the State and a loan book worth €20 billion is now to begin the process of winding down and selling off all of that business. There is a huge body of work on the part of the State to do what it can to protect the jobs, the staff and the customers who bank with Ulster Bank. I read reports this morning that AIB is seeking to buy what has been termed the crown jewels, the commercial loan book, from Ulster Bank, but what about those loans that are not performing at 100%? My colleague, Deputy McGuinness, raised this issue on the radio this morning. What about those loans that are on the margins? More and more people will be in that situation because of the pandemic. What are we, as a State, as a Government and as a country, going to do to protect those who have already fallen or are about to fall on hard times? We urgently need a plan for the banking sector in this country. I request that a debate with the Minister of Finance, Deputy Donohoe, on the future of the banking sector be arranged as a matter of urgency. How do we protect those customers who are at risk right now and must be feeling anxiety and pressure at home? I cannot imagine what it must feel like to sit at home and wonder whether one's mortgage is going to be sold to a vulture fund and what that might mean for one and one's family home.

It is also important that we have a conversation about how to inject more competition into the banking sector. How do we ensure fair prices for consumers and reasonable mortgage and loan rates for people? We know that ours are some of the most expensive in Europe. This requires extensive debate and consideration. We need a plan of action.

I have used most of my time to address this particular issue because it is of such importance to the country. The cracks are showing and we really need to move on this. We urgently need to hear from the Minister for Finance as to what we can do collectively, as a Parliament, to protect those customers and future customers from the very fragile banking sector in this country.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I oppose nobody, a Chathaoirligh.

Senator Paul Gavan: I may quote Senator Mullen on that later.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I may, of course, oppose certain ideas along the way. The announcement of the proposed arrangements for the leaving certificate this year is, it is to be hoped, a move towards certainty where there has been considerable confusion and upset. I have no doubt that some of the confusion will continue and that there will be twists and turns in the road. I am concerned about the cancellation of the junior certificate. Parents have been in touch with me to say that this announcement, made in February, will have a significant demotivational effect on their children who are doing the junior certificate. One mother told me that her daughter would effectively down tools for the remaining three months of the school year. I was accused of being insensitive for using the phrase “down tools” but it is operative in this situation. Is this the right message to send to children? It raises questions. It is to be hoped that the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will look at the issue of leaving certificate reform but we need to think about the State examinations in the context of all of this. Are they the end point of a holistic and well-rounded education for our young people or have they been reduced to a box-ticking exercise and a great hurdle to be overcome if one is to access college? It seems to be viewed as a political hurdle to be overcome, with the cancellation of the examinations being the Government’s response in this case. We need a debate on how our education is functioning and, in many cases, not functioning.

I also want to bring to the attention of the House a study reported on in today’s edition of *The Irish Times*. This study found that the wish to die among older people living in the community is often transient and is strongly linked to depression and feelings of loneliness. Apart from the challenge that poses to us to address such feelings in our society, it is also a reminder to us that what is often proposed as an argument for euthanasia or assisted dying is, in fact, indicative of other problems we need to solve. I also note that a group of UN rapporteurs issued an opinion in late January with regard to recent developments regarding laws providing for assisted suicide or euthanasia internationally.

An Cathaoirleach: I ask for ciúnas in the Chamber while the Senator is speaking.

Senator Rónán Mullen: One of those rapporteurs is a distinguished Irish academic, Mr. Gerard Quinn. The group expressed alarm at a growing trend to enact legislation enabling access to medically assisted dying based largely on having a disability or disabling condition, including in old age. The group warned that euthanasia was increasingly being availed of by poorer people and people from racial and sexual minorities. This opinion stated that these legislative provisions tend to rest on, or draw strength from, ableist assumptions about the inherent quality of life or worth of the life of a person with a disability. We have seen the negative developments in places such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Canada. The negative trajectory in respect of euthanasia is clear. This raises questions, not only for the Dáil which has the so-called Dying with Dignity Bill 2020 to consider or for the Oireachtas Select Committee on Justice which will also have to consider it, but for the Houses of the Oireachtas regarding how to vindicate human dignity. Facilitating access to assisted suicide or assisted dying is not the compassionate response and, increasingly, it is seen to be a counterproductive response because it sets us on a negative trajectory, which is detrimental to people’s lives and happiness.

Senator Mark Wall: I propose an amendment to the Order of Business that No. 7 be taken before No. 1. I refer to putting the Local Government (Use of CCTV in Prosecution of Offences) Bill 2021 on the Order Paper. The Bill seeks to confer a statutory footing similar to that conferred on the Garda Síochána by section 38 of the 2005 Act on the use by local authorities of CCTV in cases where the prosecution of offences is a function vested in them. I hope colleagues can support this proposal to amend the Order of Business.

Given that submissions to the public consultation of the commission on the Defence Forces will close on 5 March, I ask the Leader to invite the Minister for Defence to come before us to discuss a widespread and somewhat worrying state of affairs in the Defence Forces at this time. My colleague, Deputy Nash, received very worrying figures this week in reply to a parliamentary question he asked about the amount of money returned to the Exchequer from the defence budget in recent years. A total of €56 million was returned to the Exchequer between 2017 and 2020, and €130 million has been returned in the past seven years. These are astonishing figures given the recruitment and retention crisis, the lack of suitable barrack accommodation, the reduction in operational capacity and the failure to backdate increased allowances to members of the elite Army ranger wing, some of whom we understand are owed up to €40,000. PDFORRA and the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, have highlighted it for years, yet significant sums of money have been returned to the Exchequer and the problems in the Defence Forces go unchecked. The time has come to examine how we allocate money to defence, including allocating money to cover salaries, training costs and military preparedness, including equipment, and to put an urgent end to the practice of returning money from the defence budget to the Exchequer. The commission is tasked with looking into the recruitment and retention problems in the Defence Forces. I respectfully ask it to begin by undertaking an urgent investigation into these figures, which are worrying to say the least.

I wish to raise the heroes of Jadotville once again in this Chamber. The Leader will remember the widespread support they got from so many Members of this House when we discussed this important event some months ago. Thankfully, in response to the debate that day, the Minister for Defence announced that an independent review board would be set up to examine this most important Irish military engagement. I record our continued thanks to all those local authorities that passed motions supporting the awarding of medals and recognising the bravery of the heroes of Jadotville. It is great to see that this important event in Irish military history and those who fought in it have such widespread support right around the country. I sincerely hope the heroes of Jadotville will get the reward their bravery and representation deserves. To quote the words of George Hamilton from another famous Irish event: “The nation holds its breath.”

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I also wish to bring up the issue raised by Senator Chambers on the retreat of Ulster Bank. It was a devastating morning for the 2,800 staff employed by the bank to wake up and hear that on the news. It is really interesting is that NatWest, unexpectedly, reported pre-tax profits in the UK of £64 million. We are seeing a banking system in Ireland that is at the whim of profit. Many mortgage holders, lenders and savers are in the middle of this for-profit system of banking and saving. One of the elements of the programme for Government is a commitment to enable the credit union movement to grow as a key provider of community banking in the country. More broadly, we need to have a conversation about public banking because we cannot have what Senator Chambers referred to as a “duopoly” when it comes to banking. We must look at who is benefiting from banking. The SME sector is very much dependent on the banking system. It is key to our economy, but it is also key to our communities. We have witnessed the closure of post offices throughout the country. Post offices were very much part of banking for a very long time and that has kind of been removed from the market as well. We need to have an open conversation about where to next for businesses and communities when it comes to banking.

The leaders of the G7 are meeting today. It is a momentous day because Joe Biden is back on board with the World Health Organization and the Paris accord. As such, this is a significant day for climate and for health internationally. The commitment by many governments to

donate extra vaccines to those who need them around the world is very welcome. I know that issue is up for discussion today. Ireland really needs to ramp up in that regard and give that commitment.

Senator Paul Gavan: Like several other Senators, I wish to raise the issue of Ulster Bank. It is particularly concerning that 2,400 good jobs may be lost. There may be significant implications for mortgage holders and small businesses across the State. I was not encouraged by listening to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, this morning. He seemed to be speaking in terms of a hands-off approach. I hope that will not be the case. There was a more encouraging response from the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, yesterday in terms of the need to build a third banking force in the country. A point made very eloquently this morning by Deputy Pearse Doherty is that the State has a real say in this because it is the majority owner of AIB and Permanent TSB. As such, the Minister for Finance is in a unique position, as a result of the powers he has at his disposal, to build that third banking force. The State did not have those controls before the previous crash but it has them now and it needs to use them. To adopt a *laissez-faire* approach on this issue would be disastrous for all concerned. I call for a debate on this matter.

I wish to raise the issue of Iconic Newspapers. Many Senators will be familiar with that particular brand which owns titles across the country, including the *Limerick Leader* in my neck of the woods. I am very concerned that it has laid off 16 editorial staff in recent weeks and cut the weekly working hours of 20 other journalists. The key point is that was done without negotiation. All present appreciate the challenges the newspaper industry is currently facing. I certainly support calls for creative Government intervention to ensure the survival of local newspapers and independent local radio. The key point is that collective bargaining is essential in this situation. Unfortunately, Iconic Newspapers is refusing to speak to the National Union of Journalists, NUJ, which represents the staff in question. I hope that all colleagues will join me in calling on Iconic Newspapers to engage with its workforce and the union to ensure proper progress on these issues and challenges.

Of course, I would not need to make the call for collective bargaining between the NUJ and Iconic Newspapers if there was a statutory right to collective bargaining in this country. As colleagues are aware, such a right does not exist. I call for a debate on the whole issue of collective bargaining because I am concerned, as are many in the trade union movement, about the decision of the Tánaiste to write to the EU Commission to lobby for the new EU directive in respect of minimum wages and collective bargaining to be watered down such that it will not be legally binding. I note a letter sent by Mandate Trade Union to the Tánaiste earlier this week. It stated that his stance on this issue is totally unacceptable and can only be seen as an abdication of moral and political responsibility towards some of the most vulnerable workers in our society. It is not good enough to speak about collective bargaining and say workers have these rights when it has not been acknowledged that Ireland is one of the few countries that does not have a statutory right to collective bargaining. I would like to hear from all parties on this issue. For example, does Fianna Fáil go along with the view of the Tánaiste that we should water down this crucial EU directive to give rights to every worker in the country to have collective bargaining in his or her workplace?

Senator Frances Black: I wish to highlight the very important issue-----

An Cathaoirleach: I apologise, I called the Senator too early. I will give her a moment to catch her breath because there are a few staircases around Leinster House. Senator Black can take a moment and begin her contribution whenever she is ready.

Senator Frances Black: I thank the Cathaoirleach. I highlight the demolition of Irish and EU-funded aid structures, including homes and schools, in the occupied Palestinian West Bank in recent months. In the past few weeks, Israeli authorities have once again demolished or confiscated homes in the Palestinian village of Humsa al Bqai'a in the northern Jordan Valley. When this village was demolished in November 2020, it was, according to the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, which is a fantastic organisation, the biggest single demolition since 2016. It left 11 Palestinian families homeless, including 41 children, in extremely cold weather and a pandemic. This is an unconscionable violation of international law and it is extremely hard to imagine children being left in this situation.

Since November, the Palestinian families involved have tried to rebuild their lives and homes with important and welcome EU and Irish support, mainly through the West Bank Protection Consortium and humanitarian organisations. In that time, however, Israeli authorities have simply come back and again destroyed or confiscated the structures. It has happened four times in as many months and it is greatly traumatising for the families impacted. I cannot even imagine the anguish they are going through.

In that context, I ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, to come into the House to answer some questions about what the Department of Foreign Affairs and the EU are doing to recover the aid money which was provided for these destroyed structures. In October, in response to a parliamentary question in the Dáil, the Minister mentioned that EU states had sought up to €625,000 in compensation. How much of that money has been recovered? Is that figure just for 2020 or to what period does it apply?

More important, what is the longer term strategy for these aid projects? It is surely not sustainable to give money to build houses and schools, see them demolished, issue statements of concern, rebuild those houses and schools and then wait for the next round of demolitions. In this case, that has happened four times in four months. It is like the definition of insanity. What is happening is devastating and traumatising and is leaving families in horrendous situations, not to mention the wasteful and recurring destruction of structures funded by Irish public monies. In that context, I ask the Minister to come into the House and to answer some questions. Is the plan to just continue with this current strategy and, if not, what will change?

An Cathaoirleach: I would just like to inform Senator Burke, before he leaves the House, that a seat is available for him. He is last on the rota of speakers but he will be called to contribute.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Today, I would like the House to remember that 100 years ago tomorrow the Irish Republican Army in east Cork suffered the largest loss of life of volunteers at Clonmult, some 7 miles outside of Midleton, when 12 young men - two of whom were my grand-uncles - were killed and eight were taken prisoner. The defeat was a great boost to the British at the time. The event has largely been forgotten because it did not end in victory for the republicans. It is important, however, that this House remembers these people. If the Cathaoirleach does not mind, I will read a poem written in 1922 by Isabel Burke from Cork, "In Memory of the Brave Boys who fell at Clonmult":

In the glory of manhood and strength they came

To fight for their cause and true,

And the patriot fire in each breast aflame

19 February 2021

Blazed brightly for Roisín Dhú.

Stout hearts full of hope on that threshold stood
Which led to the fields of death,
For the fury of foemen around them brewed
They felt it in every breath.

But never a shadow of fear knew they
It was theirs but to do or die,
Theirs to fall in the hush of a springtide day
‘Neath the blue of an Irish sky.

They are gone they’re asleep in a martyr’s grave
They have earned a martyr’s crown,
Just one short year to-day their pure lives they gave
For love of Eire they laid them down.

But in letters of gold their names shall shine
Angels hover where oft’ they’ve trod,
May they rest evermore in His realms divine
Those brave soldiers of Eire’s sod.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator for remembering the men who died in Clonmult. It was the largest loss suffered by the volunteers during the War of Independence and we remember them all on this day in this House.

Senator Emer Currie: It is looking like the schools might reopen in some fashion on 1 March, maybe for junior infants, senior infants and up to second class, and leaving certificate and fifth-year students. There are positive signs from the Cabinet subcommittee but nothing has been set in stone. The reopening of schools is the single most important action that we can take for students’ physical movement, education and socialisation, and it will be a huge relief for a lot of parents. I am at a loss as to how the same collective empathy and efforts were not there for pupils of special education. Everyone should have rowed in behind the Minister with responsibility for special education to get pupils back to school as has been done in the North and in most of the countries in western Europe. Half of all primary school children could be

back at school on Monday week but ten days before that we only have 50% attendance at special schools. Special classes are due to open on Monday but many parents have not received a communication from the schools about those arrangements and there is a lot of anxiety out there. Last night, Fórsa issued a statement about a work to rule in terms of special needs assistants and caused a lot of anxiety this morning concerning the purpose of that statement. There are a lot of worried parents and I feel that the language around this has been all wrong. Where is our collective will for such a vulnerable group?

I wish to mention another issue. Consideration must be given to exempting the strict two-year rule for early childhood care and education, ECCE. I ask because pupils who have special needs, and may have had their assessment of needs as part of ECCE, have had a very disrupted two years. Some of their parents, teachers and principals of the preschools feel that these pupils should remain in ECCE for another year. They have been told that they cannot and there needs to be some reflection on that.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: It is no secret that I was a member of Óglaigh na hÉireann. For a number of years I was stationed in the western command in Dún Uí Mhaoilíosa in Galway. I am very proud of my time in Óglaigh na hÉireann.

On Monday of this week, I was contacted about the commemoration of an IRA bomber in London. Looking at Senator Fitzpatrick and the brave men that she referred to a few moments ago, I wish to say that these people who went to London and bombed places, bombed people out of their homes in Northern Ireland, and terrorised people to hell and back do not fit into the same category as the people the Senator spoke about. To use the term Óglaigh na hÉireann for members of the Provisional IRA, or any of their trappings, to my mind is an outrage. It is an absolute insult to the fine men and women who have served this country since the State was founded, and to those who put their lives at risk in the name of peace all over the world. These cowardly so-and-sos who instructed or coerced that young man to take a bomb to London, these are the same so-and-sos who rang my mother at 3 o'clock in the morning to tell her that I would be shot, or my father. A couple of weeks ago the Cathaoirleach gave me great leeway to speak about getting past where we are now and the constant statement "They haven't gone away, you know". When they use the words "Óglaigh na hÉireann" to commemorate bombers, including online, they insult this country. I have tried my damndest to be fair to Sinn Féin since coming into this House. There are some wonderful parliamentarians in Sinn Féin, some really talented people, but they seem to have a block when it comes to saying "What you are doing and saying is wrong". I ask that the Sinn Féin Party step out and say it is a normal political party and does not accept the trappings of commemorating bombers who killed innocent people. There is only one Óglaigh na hÉireann in this country. It is our Army, our Air Corps and our Naval Service, and I am damned proud we have them.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I also wish to raise the issue of Ulster Bank raised by some of my colleagues. It is the end of a 160-year era. We all remember the Henry the Hippo money box growing up. Today is a huge blow for the 2,800 staff. It is also hugely worrying for those customers who have non-performing loans or who may have restructured their loans recently due to being put on the pandemic unemployment payment. We therefore need to ask the Minister what we will do for these customers. Where do they land? Will their loans be taken over by vulture funds? How can we give them proper assurances that the terms and conditions that apply to their current Ulster Bank mortgages will apply in the case of whatever institution takes them over?

We also have to be very cognisant, as Deputy McGuinness has pointed out, that vulture companies are very aggressively pursuing in the courts people who are defaulting on their mortgages and, more importantly, that such companies have not turned up to the Committee of Public Accounts when invited to address issues its members have raised. I would like to see, as my colleagues have said, an urgent debate in this House on how we will protect those vulnerable customers before any decision is made.

I wish to raise a campaign by Hyperemesis Ireland that routine drugs for women suffering from severe morning sickness such as Cariban be provided on the drugs payment scheme. These drugs can cost some women up to €2,000 during their pregnancies. This affects 1% of women, and that 1% is regularly hospitalised during pregnancy. If, however, they are able to take these drugs regularly and on time, hospitalisation is generally not necessary. We are asking the Minister to put these drugs on the drugs payment scheme because this is really unfair on these women. The drugs are hugely cost-prohibitive. It is a reasonable ask.

Senator Tim Lombard: I wish to raise the issue of beef prices and where they are going at the moment. We have seen an alarming decline in beef prices in the past three or four weeks. I had beef farmers on to me yesterday absolutely devastated that there has been a further decline in prices of 10 cent per kilo this week alone in the factories. Taking into consideration that fertiliser prices and grain prices are going up and beef prices are going down, the industry is going into crisis. We have had beef protests over recent years; we had tribunals years before that. We have never solved the question of how farmers can get a fair price for a fair product. We have a top-quality product, and that lack of fairness and traceability in the marketplace is becoming a huge issue. It is appropriate now that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine come before the House to explain his views on the food ombudsman, which is his silver bullet to ensure that the market can be shown how it will work on the ground. This ombudsperson has the ability, if properly legislated for, to become a game changer. That is the issue. If proper legislation and proper finance are put in place and a proper person put in charge to ensure he or she can drive the agenda, I believe we can have that fairness in the marketplace that we do not have now. We have spoken about this ombudsman for many years. We put money into the last budget for the ombudsman. Now we need to see the legislation come before the Houses and we need action from the Government. To be perfectly honest, if we do not get this ombudsman in place, if we do not fund the office and if we do not have the right person in charge, then we will have no beef industry. One thing is certain, namely, that the beef barons do not care about beef farmers in west County Cork. The only way we can protect them is to ensure that we put proper legislation and a proper ombudsman in place.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I wish to second the amendment to the Order of Business proposed by my colleague, Senator Wall. Illegal dumping may not seem the most important issue but for those of us living in communities in counties Dublin and Kildare and right across the country, it is an enormous issue and causes a huge amount of frustration to many.

I, too, raise the issue of Ulster Bank. I express my solidarity with the 2,800 staff who still face a hugely uncertain future. The bank also has more than 1 million customers, a large number of whom have loans with it. The non-performing loan ratio in Ulster Bank was just under 10% last year. There is now huge fear and anxiety among those people about where their loans are going to go to. I wish to register my great and deep alarm at the comments made by the Minister for Finance this morning on RTE radio and at his rather laid-back attitude to the future of the banking sector. We heard repeatedly that this was a commercial matter but that is not good enough. We have a majority share in AIB and Permanent TSB and a minority share in

Bank of Ireland. We have an onerous macroprudential system that seeks to ensure the stability of banks and the banking sector, yet we cannot bring ourselves to talk about competition in the banking sector in this country. That needs to change. I ask that it be requested that the Minister come to this House.

I reiterate my call for the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to also come to the House. I am conscious I have only a few seconds left but once again more and more stories are coming through about people falling through the cracks because they are not a rateable business. I do not understand this illogical fixation with businesses needing to be rateable to qualify. We have the Covid restrictions support scheme and the Covid-19 business aid scheme, both of which require that businesses to be rateable. Why do we not use VAT as the identifier for businesses in trouble? Turning to the Department of Social Protection, people who are working in the arts and who were employed but failed to get the pandemic unemployment payment because of their circumstances last year are continually being failed. I am asking for the Minister for Social Protection to be asked to come to the House as well.

Senator Timmy Dooley: Like other Senators, I refer to Ulster Bank and call on the State to intervene yet again. We did so ten years ago and it was the right thing to do. We must intervene again. We must do so for the customers and the workers and to ensure that there is a competitive banking sector in this country. Our previous intervention was aimed at ensuring that we had an effective banking system. We cannot allow a situation to develop where effective competition is reduced to the point where we do not have an appropriate marketplace. That will require the intervention of the State and if it is done appropriately and correctly - and quickly - then the many workers who earn an income and who depend on the bank for their livelihoods will be protected, as will customers.

The State must also, as part of addressing banking system, look at addressing our post office network. We have spoken previously about how a Grant Thornton report prepared for the postmasters identified a requirement of €17 million to protect the network as it is currently constituted. Today, in the village of Broadford, east County Claire, final notification is coming of the closure of the post office just because the postmaster has retired. This is at time when Covid-19 has restructured the way we live our lives such that people want to go back and live in rural communities. They want to telework and to work through Zoom and Microsoft Teams and other mechanisms. They want to live in their villages away from the clusters they had become used to. Why then is An Post closing post offices in places like Broadford where there is a growing community? The nearest other post office is 15 km away. There is no justification for what is happening. State intervention is required. A level of funding is needed to support a public service obligation on the part of An Post to maintain the network as it is currently constituted. We, in this House, need to address that as soon as possible.

Senator Martin Conway: I am most disappointed that the issue of special needs education seems to have fallen down the pecking order again in terms of priority. It is great that some classes are coming back in a week's time but no classes should be coming back ahead of those containing special needs students. Every student with special needs should be back at least at the same time as the first classes that return. We need to get the Minister for Education back into the House to get an update on exactly what is happening in that regard.

I raise the issue of Ulster Bank. The Ulster Bank network, particularly in County Clare, has been quite successful. I feel sorry for the dozens of people working in the Ulster Bank branch in Ennis and its customers in County Clare. Many of those customers live in rural parts of the

county and have benefited from a mobile Ulster Bank service for many years. It has traversed the length and breadth of the county to provide banking services in areas where such services would not otherwise have been provided. We need an urgent debate on the matter. We also need Government intervention to deal with the Ulster Bank issue.

The appointment of a chairman of the board of Shannon Airport was made last Tuesday but was revoked six hours later, for good reason. I now believe that business people in the mid-west, the tourism sector and various stakeholders should have an input into the appointment of the board chairman because it is such a critical appointment for Clare, the mid-west and Shannon Airport and also for our recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. Aviation is the lifeblood of Clare because it generates tourism and we need to deal with that matter.

I know the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, will come before the House to discuss the mother and baby homes this afternoon. Like others, I am perplexed and disappointed that we have not made quicker progress on the issue. Where have we been on this issue for the past month? We have not made the progress that we urgently need. We have let these people down since the day they were born and we need to deal with the matter immediately.

Senator Fintan Warfield: Last weekend, the *Business Post* led with the Tánaiste’s statement that there would be no indoor gatherings of more than 50 people until the autumn. While the GAA and weddings receive an awful lot of warranted attention in these Houses, nightlife and the night economy rarely do. That is probably because those who legislate for it, with all due respect, have little experience of that sector.

An Cathaoirleach: They do not get out enough.

Senator Fintan Warfield: There is no specific nightclub licence or permit in law. Instead, we have a shocking special exemption order system, which is a ridiculous mechanism that costs businesses hundreds of euro every month in court and solicitor fees, and an additional tax for later opening hours. Millions of euro leave the industry to pay for bureaucracy every year.

I understand that the Government has set up a night-time economy task force which is due to report in June. I would welcome a debate in this House at the point when the Minister presents the Houses with the report from the task force. Dublin, Cork and other cities around the country need a thriving nightlife. The world can no longer be placed into a 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. box and a 9 p.m. to 2.30 a.m. box. Better use of our cities and spaces is needed. We are spending more time on our screens and more people will be working from home. People need social interactions and we need a situation that is comparable to that enjoyed by our European neighbours. Dublin does not even rank among the 30 best cities in the world for quality of life. We cannot reopen nightlife on the same terms on which it closed. It needs to be reformed and we need to do that in time for its reopening.

Senator Paul Gavan: Well said.

Senator Shane Cassells: I want to touch on the Land Development Agency Bill which came before the Houses of the Oireachtas this week. Coming from a county with such a huge population as Meath, the pressure of providing homes is something we deal with on a daily basis, whether through social housing waiting lists or private developments. I back the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, 100% in his remark that this is about delivering homes, not dogma. During the debate, several Deputies from rural

areas stated that there was nothing in this Bill for rural Ireland. We are talking about trying to develop large-scale housing. By its very nature, one would not be doing that in the countryside. One Deputy from Limerick attacked the Land Development Agency, LDA, as the death knell for rural Ireland. One of the current developments on the books is the Colbert Station Quarter development, which will include thousands of homes, thousands of units of student accommodation, enterprise and hotels. One would not build that in the countryside. Responsible politicians either want to develop large-scale housing or play to the gallery, but they cannot do both. We have to be honest with people.

What yesterday's debate did show is that there is clearly a growing frustration surrounding planning in rural areas, which is equally valid. People see planning policies driving urbanisation and they see it, rightly or wrongly, as being at the expense of rural areas. The national planning framework is without doubt driving a wedge down the middle of this country and creating a lot of anger. The Office of the Planning Regulator and the Minister need to take account of this and we need to reconcile it. I am a townie. I believe in creating large-scale urban areas in order to provide services and have a centralised population for transport, broadband and cultural and viable commercial enterprises. However, I equally respect people from rural areas who want to continue working and living there, and so should the planning regulator.

The backdrop to this debate in the Dáil in the previous term was that services such as post offices were being closed in rural areas. Services can only be provided where there are population bases. This exceptionally rigid approach is going to result not just in people not being able to live in the areas in which they were born, but also, ultimately, in the death of rural services because there will not be a population base to serve them. That will mean the destruction of the fabric of these areas. The Leader is well aware of the anger in places such as rural north and south Meath, where the urban influence is now restricting planning greatly. We need a debate with the Minister on both the planning framework and the legislation that has come before the Dáil in tandem with it, in order that we do not value one aspect of Irish life above the other.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: In the midst of the pandemic, accurate and reliable information is vitally important, as it curbs anxiety. Such information about the pandemic should also be readily accessible and easy to understand. If that information happens to report positive progress, it also harnesses hope. Since the start of the pandemic we have gotten daily reports and the tragic statistics of the fatalities. Yet, the way the daily information in respect of vaccines is disseminated and published at the moment leaves an awful lot to be desired. We are given an overall number of six figures and the following night we are given the new figure but the number of vaccines given in the previous 24 hours is not reported, as is the case in the British media. This should not be too hard to do. It would be transparent and would not be about criticising the Government if on some days there were no additions, as was the case in the recent past. We need clear and accessible information on the number of new, increased and additional vaccines given in the previous 24 hours. Otherwise, people at home will be scampering for their pens to subtract from the previous night's figure, and that is only if they were lucky enough to be tuned in to the report of the numbers on the television. This information should be easy to follow. It will be a great injection of hope which we can harness in such challenging times. NPHET and RTÉ must give people easy to follow, transparent and accessible information on a daily basis, especially when it is such good news.

Senator Barry Ward: Gabhaim buíochas, a Chathaoirligh agus a Cheannaire. I welcome the statement by the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, that she will extend access to rent supplement for the victims of domestic violence without a means test. The Leader

will be aware that this measure was introduced last August to facilitate people who had to leave home because of domestic violence and to ensure they were not left with nowhere to go. I also acknowledge the work done by the women's caucus on Limerick City and County Council and my colleague, Councillor Sarah Kiely, the leader of that caucus, in recognising how much more difficult the lockdown has been for women, in particular, and the victims of domestic violence. It is important to acknowledge this.

I note that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council is the only local authority in the country that does not have a women's refuge. I have raised this issue with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman. We have been talking about this since I was elected to the council in 2009, when the matter was raised. It seems bizarre to me that in a large populous area like Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown we do not have a women's refuge. There is a major lacuna in the provision of services in the area and we know from statistics given by Safe Ireland that seven families, that is, seven groups of women and children, are being turned away every day because facilities are not available. The position is obviously worse now in the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown area. I ask that the House agree to discuss this issue and have it brought to the fore of the debate, particularly in the context that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council is the only local authority area in the country where these services are not provided. The issue is also particularly acute given that it is probably the local authority with the highest property prices and rents in the country. This is a real problem that needs to be addressed. I call for a debate on the issue.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I lend my support to the Senators who spoke about the staff and customers of Ulster Bank. A worrying situation is developing in banking. Senator Dooley mentioned the post office network. Credit unions, which are in every urban and rural area of the country, have also provided a tremendous service. They are seeking greater involvement in the banking system but have been prevented from doing this mainly by the Central Bank. That should also be taken into account.

Before I speak about turf cutting, I fully endorse the environmental programme of the Government and the just transition fund. I acknowledge that we have a world crisis with regard to the environment. Ireland cannot be left behind and must move with the world. We must make many moves and changes to improve our environment to ensure our people have a good supply of healthy water and air. In that regard, I ask the Leader to request that the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, come to the Seanad in the coming weeks for a discussion on solid fuels and, in particular, turf cutting. I listened to the Minister yesterday morning on "Morning Ireland" and, in fairness to him, he said that those who cut turf for domestic use do not have anything to worry about. I fully endorse the actions of the Minister and Government on extending the ban on smoky coal. I also agree with the Minister that wet timber is not a good fuel to burn. Common sense would indicate it is a bad thing. Many older people rely on turf cutting. I hope the House will have a reasonable debate on this issue. The Minister stated this was a consultation. Consultation has been taking place on issues since year dot or since Jesus was a boy. Some people are saying the consultation is a big deal. I urge people who have an opinion on this to do as the Minister and Government have asked, namely, put their opinion to paper and send it in to the consultation process. I ask that the Minister come to the House, in his own time, and have a constructive debate about this whole matter.

Senator Paddy Burke: First, I wish Séamus Haughey the best of luck in his retirement, having spent 38 years in the Oireachtas Library and Research Service.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Hear, hear.

Senator Paddy Burke: Séamus was an outstanding and very efficient public official, who always came back to Members when we had queries for the library. He treated every Member of both Houses in the same manner. He will be a huge loss to the library service and a huge loss to the House. I wish him well on his retirement next week.

I ask the Leader to ask the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to come to the House in regard to the technological universities Bill. What is the position in regard to the west and north-west technological university? Has an application been made yet in regard to the proposed university? The other issue is that of governance so that each area would be represented within the university, each area would have a representative on the governing body and each would play an important part in regard to the governance of the proposed technological university. This is a Bill and an area that brings education right to the regions. It is a hugely important step forward and it is very important at this point in time that we would have the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science come to the House.

Like other Members, I would like to express my sadness at the closing of Ulster Bank. It will be a huge loss as a banking force to the country and, not least, to the 2,800 people working in it and its thousands of customers. We have an outstanding branch in Castlebar, the county town of Mayo, and it will be a huge loss to our area. The Minister needs to come to the House for a debate on banking in this country and I look forward to that taking place in the near future.

An Cathaoirleach: I join with the Senator in paying tribute to Séamus Haughey after 38 years of service. He is an outstanding researcher with a wealth of information and knowledge, and he was able to get it to Members as quickly as they needed it, often under huge time constraints. He is a consummate gentleman to his fingertips.

I call the Leader to respond on the Order of Business.

Senator Regina Doherty: I join in the good wishes. Hopefully, Séamus will have a very long, healthy and happy retirement. He has served countless generations of Members of both Houses exceptionally well.

I want to take the issue of Ulster Bank in the round because a number of Senators have raised it and I will not reply to them individually. Arising from the announcement this morning on Ulster Bank and, indeed, the devastating impact it is going to have on our banking sector, not least the impact on its customers and employees, I made a request to the Minister for Finance for an urgent debate, not just on the impact of the closures of Ulster Bank, but on the future of banking for Irish citizens, Irish society and the economy as a whole. The Minister is in Brussels on Monday and, because of his restriction requirements, he will not be able to come to us on Friday, but he will give us a date the following week. I ask for the patience of Senators. I know it is an incredibly important situation and, notwithstanding that we are going to get a lot of inquiries from employees and customers over the next couple of weeks, the week after next is the earliest that I can ask the Minister to come to the House.

In response to Senator Burke, I will certainly ask the Minister, Deputy Harris, to come to talk to us and to have statements or a debate on technological universities. They are going to be a game changer for the regions and they will take away the impetus for people, in particular young students, to go to our cities. It would be a very welcome debate.

In response to Senator Murphy, while I do not have any connection or association with anybody who cuts turf, I know how important it is to those families and to counties where people rely on it. For those people who are going to be using it for their own domestic use, it is very important, following the assurances that the Minister gave this week, that the information is very clear. We need to have a general debate on it in the round. The Minister is with us the week after next, although that is with regard to aviation, but I will ask for a debate to be scheduled around domestic turf cutting and the future of fuel and fuel usage in this country.

Senator Ward raised the very welcome announcement yesterday by the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, of the initiative that we took to alleviate the normal conditions of rent supplement applications for women and their children who are fleeing dangerous situations in their home, although this shows how much it is still needed. To be honest, I think it is something that should be made permanent. It is not something that is just prevalent for those women and their children during the pandemic. I realise why we did this and I want to thank Safe Ireland for its representations and its pushing on this issue last year. It is something that exists in a woman's life when she is fleeing domestic violence at any time, not just during the pandemic, so we should probably look to make it more permanent.

I do very much welcome it.

Senator Martin raised a point that is important during normal times but is absolutely important during these times. It applies not only to the information on vaccinations, which I hope will gather pace and become more clear. At a time when people are suffering or, at best, despairing or fed up, it also applies to the communication that comes from the Government, government agencies and the representative bodies that give us our information, our guidance and our tour. The quality of the information and the mediums through which it comes absolutely must be consistent and pitch perfect. One of the criticisms of the Government in recent months is probably that it has not been 100%. It certainly needs to be 100% from now on. I believe we have enjoyed social cohesion in this country over the past year because people have trust. We need to maintain that trust. The information we give to people must be clear, concise and in a medium they can accept and trust. This is very important.

Senator Cassells spoke about the Land Development Agency Bill 2021, which will be in Seanad Éireann in the coming weeks after it has gone through the Dáil. I agree with the Senator that there is a risk of trying to divide society. The national planning framework cannot be allowed to pit rural Ireland against urban Ireland. We absolutely need to have both sectors thriving. I believe the Minister will come to the House on 22 March to talk about the national development plan. I will confirm this to the House once it has been confirmed to me.

Senator Warfield has asked for a debate on our night-time economy. I wish I felt young enough to be looking forward to a night-time economy in the future. The report is due in June. I will give a heads-up now to the Minister to set a date for us. As soon as the report is published, it will be a very worthwhile experiment for us to talk about what we look forward to when our economy reopens and the new development of having a night-time economy for those revellers who are able to go through the evening.

Senator Conway brought up a number of issues, one of which was the issue of the mother and baby homes, which continues to cause no end of hurt and despair to survivors and their children. The Minister will be in the House this afternoon for the last session. When we started talking about the report in January, I committed to continuing the debate until every Member of

the House who wanted to have an opportunity to speak on the report had the opportunity. We have nine speakers this afternoon and there are six free slots. I encourage any Member who has not put his or her name down to do so for this afternoon. There are still many questions outstanding arising from the report. It is our responsibility and duty as a State to make sure we give the answers to the ladies and to their families that they so wish, and which are so badly needed, so we can start the reparations and that they are started now. There are a number of Bills before the House from different parties with regard to adoption and tracing. The Government's Bill will be published in the next few weeks. We need to come together collectively to give a resolution to the many generations of hurt and pain and not to compound it, as has happened over the past weeks, with hurt on hurt because of some of the difficulties with the commission's report.

Senator Conway also talked about Shannon Airport. I agree with the Senator. I commend the members from the counties of Tipperary and Clare, and Limerick city and county. Shannon Airport is obviously the cornerstone of the recovery of the economy in that area. It is wholly dependent on making sure we have the routes and the traffic in and out of that airport. The development body will be incredibly important to that. I acknowledge the Senator's request for that debate.

Senator Conway and others requested a debate on special education. The Minister was here some weeks ago but we have travelled a bit of a journey since then. We might request another debate going back, to make sure all of our children who have additional needs and requirements are looked after over the coming weeks.

Senator Sherlock seconded Senator Wall's amendment to the Order of Business. I am very happy to accept that amendment and to add the Bill to the Order Paper. I do not believe we should downplay illegal dumping. People may think it is a niche area but in rural Ireland in particular, and in some of our urban towns, it is an absolute scourge. We are all on Facebook and we are all part of social media groups where we can see that Irish people are driven insane by the ignorance, rudeness and callousness of some of our citizens who think nothing of dumping their own rubbish at a bin in the middle of the city, town or village where they live.

It is the same for those who drive into our countryside to dump stuff in our hedges and along our roads. It is absolutely disgusting behaviour. The biggest issue facing us is that we need to tackle this through a war on litter. If we continue to tackle it in the way we have, we will still be talking about it in five or ten years' time. Our local authorities need to be given far greater resources and our fines and naming and shaming need to increase. If we do not up our game and hit people where it hurts, we will still be talking about this issue in the future. The CCTV element of the Senator's Bill will help highlight who is doing this, allowing us to make further progress, so I am happy to accept the amendment. The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media is due to come before us in a number of weeks but she is due to talk to us about tourism so I am not sure we can discuss the Bill. I will request a debate on that particular topic for the Senator. That is no problem.

Senator Lombard talked about beef prices. The mantra for our farmers has always been that anybody producing a good product should be given a good price for it yet we find ourselves continuously talking about beef, milk and lamb. The legislation on an ombudsman will be very welcome. I will find out when it is due before the House. If it is not relatively soon, I will ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to the House for a debate about his plans for the sector.

Senator Ardagh talked about Ulster Bank but also about the drugs payment scheme and the small number of women who are affected by morning sickness for lengthy periods of their pregnancy. It is a false economy not to include this medication in the drugs payment scheme because those women who cannot get the drugs end up in hospital where they probably cost the State a greater amount of money than they would have if they had the drugs. I am happy to raise the matter with the Minister.

Senator Craughwell brought to the attention of the House a matter that is very topical this week. Apart from welcoming Senator Byrne's Bill and hoping it gets full support in this House and in the other House, the only thing I can say is that I am pleased that the family's wish for the commemoration not to go ahead in their name this week has been fulfilled. I am very glad that sense has prevailed with regard to this senseless operation and that the so-called commemoration has been cancelled.

Senator Currie talked about something which put a smile on the face of every mammy and daddy in the country yesterday, that is, the Minister for Education's announcement that schools were to reopen on 1 March. They are not just reopening because our children need their educators, who have, to be fair to them, done a super job over recent weeks where they have had the requisite technology and broadband, but because they need their friends. They need a social life, to leave their houses every single day, to get the exercise of walking to school, to have chats and all of the other things which we take for granted. I, for one, have four children at home and very much look forward to everybody getting back to school in the coming weeks.

I thank Senator Fitzpatrick for the very poignant and beautiful poem she read. There was silence in the House as we all listened to every single word. The poem commemorated the day that is in it tomorrow and paid respect to those people who lost their lives on all of our behalf.

Senator Black raised an intolerable situation which, on the face of it, appears to be lunacy. I do not have a response for her but I will contact the Minister for Foreign Affairs today to see if I can get her a written response this afternoon as to what the plans are because to continue doing the same thing over and over again seems to be the definition of madness. More importantly, what needs to be addressed is the cause and root of the need faced by our aid agencies to keep providing homes and shelter for those people who are continuously displaced. I will see what I can find out for the Senator today. We should have a debate on Palestine in the coming weeks if that can be arranged with the Minister.

Senator Gavan spoke about Iconic Newspapers and about Ulster Bank. The former issue has been raised a number of times in recent weeks by different Members, each of whom represent counties that have local newspapers owned by Iconic Newspapers. It is really sad. We all know the reasons. I know the Senator wanted to talk about collective bargaining and so on and that is something we can certainly have a debate on. That is no problem. We all know, however, that the supports that have been made available to our local newspapers, such as the employment wage subsidy scheme, the earlier temporary wage subsidy scheme and the rates holiday, are not enough because the advertising revenue that is these newspapers' bread and butter has been devastated. The State needs to step up if we value the quality of production in local towns and villages and the type of news they report, which is completely different to the type of news national newspapers report. If we value them, we need to support them. That is something we should all share and seek to debate, as I have done already. When I have a date, I will come back to the House with it.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly referred to the banking sector and the need for a debate. I will let her know as soon as I have a date. More importantly, she referred at the end of her contribution to COVAX. While we are all caught up in when our parents are going to get their vaccine and when we will move through the age groups from the over-80s to the over-70s and eventually move downwards, and that is hugely important for all of us, we must also be mindful of the fact that there are countries that will not be able to afford to give a vaccine to any age group. It is incumbent upon all of us to make sure that we realise our responsibility to the rest of the people who live on the planet and not just in our own country. The contribution of Dr. Michael Ryan yesterday afternoon was spectacular. We have all grown in our admiration for him over the past year. I did not even know the man existed before the pandemic. He is one of the most compassionate, educated and smart people I have ever come across. His contribution yesterday was particularly poignant. We all have a responsibility to every human on the planet and not just in our country. That is something that needs to be highlighted.

Senator Mullen was not quite berated, but somebody was perturbed when he said last week that some students might down tools. He now has the proof that a mammy is telling him that she has a fear that some of her kids might. The only thing I can say to all of our junior certificate students is that the junior certificate may have been cancelled in the format we traditionally know but all of them are going to have to do exams in their schools or relevant environments in order to get A, B, C or D grades on their papers. They will get the results in September. Anybody who downs tools is going to get a rude awakening when he or she gets a piece of paper back in September. I can only encourage all of our children to continue to do the hard work they have been doing in recent months. Some of the language in the delivery of the message could have been more fine-tuned. We need to support schools in doing those exams in the coming months.

We started today with Senator Chambers referring to the devastating news about Ulster Bank. We do need to know the future plans we have not just for the banking sector but for the economy. I genuinely look forward to us all being vaccinated and coming out the other end and enjoying what will be a new normal life, but there is the trepidation of knowing that a lot of people will be affected by the economy, and that certain sectors might not return to the extent we enjoyed prior to March 2020 and the impact that will have on them. We need to start planning to help those people to retrain and reskill and to provide a new life, not just socially in their communities but also in their work environment. That is a debate I think we should have sooner rather than later.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Wall moved an amendment to the Order of Business: "That No. 7 be taken before No. 1." The Leader has indicated that she is willing to agree to the amendment. Is the amendment agreed? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

Local Government (Use of CCTV in Prosecution of Offences) Bill 2021: First Stage

Senator Mark Wall: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to make provision in relation to

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the prevention, investigation, detection and prosecution by local authorities of certain offences; to provide for the use of closed circuit television in public places by local authorities for the purposes of those functions; and to provide for related matters.

An Cathaoirleach: Is there a seconder?

Senator Marie Sherlock: I second the proposal.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Senator Mark Wall: Next Friday.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Friday, 26 February 2021.

Sitting Arrangements: Motion

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Standing Orders relative to Public Business:

(1) On its rising today, the Seanad shall adjourn until 10.30 a.m. on Monday, 22nd February, 2021, in the Seanad Chamber and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) Commencement matters shall be taken in accordance with Standing Order 29;

(b) Standing Order 30 shall stand suspended;

(c) There shall be no Order of Business;

(d) Matters on the Business of the Seanad shall be taken in accordance with Standing Order 16 (3) at 12 noon and shall be interrupted after 12 speakers, whereupon the sitting shall be suspended for 15 minutes to allow for the sanitisation of the Chamber, and the order of speakers shall resume thereafter; provided that the 15 minutes suspension period shall not be reckoned in the overall time limit for this item of business;

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

Schedule

Suspension of Sitting.

On the conclusion of Matters on the Business of the Seanad, the sitting shall be suspended until 1.30 p.m.;

Statements on Ag Climatise - The National Climate and Air Roadmap for the Agriculture Sector:

Statements on Ag Climatise - The National Climate and Air Roadmap for the Agriculture Sector shall be taken at 1.30 p.m. and shall adjourn at 3 p.m., with the opening statement by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine not to exceed 10 minutes, the contributions of Group Spokespersons not to exceed 8 minutes, all other Senators not to exceed 5 minutes (time sharing shall not be permitted), and the Minister shall be given no less than 4 minutes to reply to the statements made on this day and the statements shall be thereupon adjourned; Suspension of Sitting.

On the conclusion of Statements on Ag Climatise - The National Climate and Air Roadmap for the Agriculture Sector, the sitting shall be suspended until 3.30 p.m.;

Motion regarding Remuneration of Councillors.

The proceedings on the Motion regarding Remuneration of Councillors shall commence at 3.30 p.m., and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after two hours and any division demanded thereon shall be postponed until immediately after the Order of Business on Friday, 26th February, 2021. Proceedings on the Motion regarding Remuneration of Councillors shall be interrupted after 12 speakers, whereupon the sitting shall be suspended for 15 minutes to allow for the sanitisation of the Chamber, and the order of speakers shall resume thereafter, provided that the 15 minutes suspension period shall not be reckoned in the overall time limit for this debate.

(2) The Seanad on its rising on Monday, 22nd February, 2021, shall adjourn until 10.30 a.m. on Friday, 26th February, 2021 in the Dáil Chamber.

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development Regulations: Motions

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development) Regulations 2021,
a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 15th February, 2021.”

Question put and agreed to.

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development) (No. 2) Regulations 2021,
a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 15th February,

2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting suspended at 1.15 p.m. and resumed at 1.30 p.m.

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

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I welcome the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman. We are going to have to run a tight ship because there are only 90 minutes for this debate. The Senators who have indicated to speak are on a list that has been agreed by the Whips and the leaders. There can be no deviation from the list. I will take the speakers in the order they come. I call Senator Buttimer.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I welcome the Minister to the House and thank him for being here. My remarks are predicated on the fact that I do not doubt his sincerity or integrity in any shape or form. I come to this debate conscious of the fact that this report which was commissioned is seen by many people as being insensitive to their needs and lived experience. It has an impact that really cannot be measured in the lives of so many people. The report is disappointing in its language. I thank the Minister for his engagement and his testimony since the publication of the report. All of us know survivors and know people who have been in mother and baby homes. Those were not homes, but institutions into which people were put. I applaud and commend the moving speech made by the Acting Chair. Ms Sharon Lawless did a power of work with her “Adoption Stories” documentary, which we should all watch and recognise the lived experience of so many people. We cannot appreciate the hurt and anger felt by those people.

A friend and I were in a particular part of Ireland during the mid-term break in February 2004. He had been in St. Patrick’s mother and baby home on the Navan Road. He had made attempts to find his birth mother and I was with him when he got a phone call from her. He did not get a phone number, but he had a rough idea of where the person was living. We went through the phone book and found the name. This was back in the days when we had phone books. I will never forget the sense of nervousness, of excitement and of joy my friend had when he made that phone call to his birth mother. She answered the call and agreed to meet him. Two days later they met. Years of frustration ended for my friend with a meeting with his birth mother, which led to a reunification of the family. Other friends of mine have not had that experience. Some have chosen to accept what happened to them and move on. Others have had a different experience, including a very good friend of mine who has been a champion, an advocate and a mother. In the life she has lived since being in Bessborough, she has tried to find the pieces of her life and to put them together for herself, for her family and for other people.

The commission ultimately did what it was asked to do. Let us, however, look at the impact and import of the report. The Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters) Records, and Another Matter, Act 2020 should be re-examined by the

Oireachtas. I hope we can do that. As a parliamentarian and former chair of an Oireachtas committee, I understand why the chair of the commission did not and cannot appear before such a committee. It is a situation, however, which adds to the hurt and anger people are feeling. We must move forward now with expedition regarding the redress scheme and really expedite this report. We cannot allow the 28 February deadline and the issue of the destruction of records and tapes to in any way cause us to demur in what we are trying to do.

I ask that the Minister and the Government look at the sites of these former mother and baby homes and not to allow development to continue and proceed in some of these areas, including, for example, at Bessborough. I ask that the Government also consider a motion put forward by Councillor Deirdre Forde in Cork City Council. It was agreed by the council that it would look at the issue of a memorial of an intertwining tree-lined avenue of remembrance. I will supply the Minister's officials with the details of that motion. We must have a memorial. We must not allow these sacred grounds to be desecrated by development because the remains of people, and their lives, are buried in these sites.

This report is about people. The Government must now show that it understands that and put in place the redress scheme to show care, compassion and understanding. The proof of this Government's intent will be in the delivery. I know that the Minister will deliver.

I hope that the anger, frustration and the voices of the people who were in these homes, which were institutions, will not be forgotten and that they will not be made feel invisible and disenfranchised anymore. The silence and the shame must be swept aside. These people must be embraced with love, care, support, affirmation and strength for the character they have shown in the lives they have lived. In addition, we must remember those whose lives were cut short.

I thank the Minister for being here today. I hope that the language used in the report, which is cold and which lacks empathy and sensitivity, can be addressed by the Government.

Senator Paul Gavan: I do not know how to deal with this matter in just six minutes, particularly as it involves such a history of evil collusion between church and State institutions. I want to begin by dealing with Manor House in Castlepollard because I am from a place just down the road from there. It is interesting to focus on how Manor House came into existence. It came into being because a local government inspector asked the congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary to set up the home. So the home was established on foot of a Government initiative. Once it was established in 1935, which was just after Fianna Fáil had banned all forms of contraception throughout the State, the Fianna Fáil Minister for Local Government and Health - do not forget that we did not have such a thing as a Minister for Health until 1948, and that tells us everything we need to know about how the State operated at the time - wrote to Cavan County Council and informed it that it needed to start directing mothers to this home because ratepayers' money would be saved as a result. It is all there in the report and is absolutely horrific. I make this point because we need to nail the nonsense that society was to blame. That was an appalling line from the Taoiseach. It was not society, it was collusion between the church institutions and the State and the politicians who ran it. That is the fact of the matter and no one should hide or veer away from that.

The details relating to Manor House are truly horrific. I encourage everyone to read the relevant chapter in full. It is a worthy chapter of a somewhat unworthy report, but I will get on to that in a minute. I will just describe some of the conditions that the women lived in. At its worst, the infant mortality rate at Manor House was 30%. The chapter states:

The living space above the stables was occupied by women and older children. A large space with six windows and no means of heating contained 27 beds with three blankets for each bed. The space was overcrowded. The second loft space was a smaller room with four windows and no means of heating. There was no ceiling in the room and the exposed roof was damaged. This room had 17 beds with three blankets for each bed.

The chapter also states that there was one clean toilet for the 44 women in Manor House. This institution was inspected and all of that to which I refer was highlighted but, as we know, nothing was done for decades.

I will not forget what happened because it relates to my first involvement in politics. When I was growing up in the 1980s, rather than having a reforming Government, we had Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil cheerleading a so-called pro-life referendum in 1983. I was proud to oppose that referendum. So, over a period of 50 years we are still stuck with this nonsense in terms of State and church collusion and the State bowing to the church on every occasion.

I will make one further point on this aspect. It was largely working-class women who were the victims in all of this. There was a great big class angle to what happened. It was a way of disposing of women and children the State did not want to know about. I need to move on because I have little time left.

As the Minister will know, we have been inundated with emails about everything that is wrong with the report. I cannot believe that others of all parties would not agree with me in terms of how outrageous some of the report's conclusions are. I refer to the idea that there was no evidence that girls and women were forced to enter mother and baby homes. It is stated in the report that they were "free to leave", "that they were not incarcerated", and "The Commission found that there is very little evidence that children were forcibly taken from their mothers" even though "the mothers did not have much choice". There is a whole list of conclusions, as the Minister knows. I want to put on record that my party rejects these conclusions. I ask the Minister to be absolutely clear on this when he responds. I am calling on the Minister - as are my party and Deputy Funchion - to extend the term of the commission of investigation. He should not allow it to be dissolved next week, particularly as no one is providing answers. We have heard no end of witnesses on public media now telling us they do not recognise the testimonies as they were recorded by the commission. No one is giving answers, and it is not good enough for no one to be available to come in to address the Oireachtas committee.

There is, however, a more fundamental point. These women are now pleading for assistance. After all they have been through, they should be the last people to have to plead with any government. We all know the history here, but I have to ask the question, who is in charge? We know who used to be in charge. We know that John A. Costello said he was a Catholic first and an Irishman second. We know the whole line of Ministers and former taoisigh who obediently knelt to kiss the archbishop's ring. We know all that. However, the Minister's party to date has no culpability on this issue. The Green Party has clean hands, yet here is the Minister and, apparently, he is not going to act or face up to the incredible things in this report that were absolutely offensive and wrong. I hope I am wrong on that. I would really welcome, when he addresses us in a few minutes' time, his clearly calling out how outrageous some of these conclusions are and his clearly calling out that he will pass emergency legislation and move very quickly to extend this commission in order that those people who deserve answers get those answers. The power is in the Minister's hands. If he does not take those actions, he will join the pantheon of politicians who have failed on this issue.

Senator Sharon Keogan: The Minister is very welcome. Regardless of one's viewpoint on it, I welcome the publication of the final report of the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes. I wish to put it on the record of the Seanad that the stories of the victims and the survivors behind this report will be locked away from the public eye for 30 years. This conflicts with the Government's and Fianna Fáil's illusion of transparency. Only the victims will have access to their own stories, and should they wish to share them with the public, the onus will be entirely upon them.

The publication of the report is at least a step towards unveiling the dark secrets of our past: the past of our families, our society, our nation, our State and the church. Clearly, much cruelty was inflicted on the thousands of vulnerable women and children in these institutions. I was horrified by the revelation that the infant mortality rate in the institutions was rampant, about twice that of those outside the system. We must reach out to survivors and provide every assistance and support possible. As I have stated before, we must help the people to heal and to rebuild their lives and make reparation for the harm suffered. I will keep a close eye on the promises the Government is making on redress and will hold it accountable. Immediate, free, accessible and comprehensive healthcare is a minimum that must be provided. This should be holistic and cover any physical, mental or emotional need.

Reflecting on the lives of the 9,000 women and children who died in these homes in such sad circumstances, I propose a national day of remembrance for them, perhaps next year, on the first day of spring. We commemorate the lives of soldiers who died for the nation and the State. Is it not fitting, then, that we should also commemorate the lives of the vulnerable who died and those who suffered because of the neglect of this nation and the State?

Regrettably, it appears that the handling of the investigation and the subsequent reporting process is opening up the survivors' wounds and betraying their trust. Many issues need to be urgently addressed regarding the way in which the commission is treating survivors and witnesses with their sensitive testimonies to the commission. The deletion of the recordings of the lived experience of survivors is quite frankly appalling, insensitive and potentially illegal. I have been personally contacted by survivors and witnesses to say they were not informed that the commission would destroy the recordings of their testimony. Siobhán, a mother who spent time in two different mother and baby homes, has told me that this raises huge questions about the lawfulness and transparency of the process. As the Data Protection Commission states, any processing of personal data should be lawful and fair. It should be transparent to the individuals what personal data concerning them were collected, used and consulted or otherwise processed and to what extent their personal data are being, or will be, processed. The principle of transparency requires that any information and communication relating to the processing of those personal data be easily accessible and easy to understand and that clear and plain language be used. Siobhán was also refused a copy of the tape of her interview when she requested it. Is that not a breach of her fundamental rights to access her own data? She made a data request on 22 January 2020. To date she has not received any reply and none of her personal data. Why is this? She has complained about the handling of her recording, the breach of their rights under the general data protection regulation, GDPR, and the alleged misrepresentation of her testimony.

The disrespectful treatment of the stories told by people is another matter in itself. People's stories were not transcribed verbatim. Rather they were summarised and, one could say, butchered. We should be putting more value on the word and experience of survivors than just distilling them down and relegating them to a mere footnote in a report. This claim also raises

another legal issue under GDPR about the accuracy of the personal data of survivors processed by the commission. Siobhán has told me that the commission has not contacted her to remedy her complaint, as it has been asked to do by the Data Protection Commission. Siobhán understandably posed the question of whether, if the commission is dissolved as intended on 28 February, her complaint then perishes with it? Will her rights be vindicated? Is the commission of investigation answerable or is it above the law? There are grave questions regarding the nature and quality of the consent obtained from witnesses and survivors by the commission and its confidential committee. These must be answered definitively before the commission is dissolved.

I call on the commission to contact in writing every single person who placed their trust in it and in the State, a State that has so often failed and abused them in the past. The commission needs to obtain explicit informed consent to destroy or retain records of witnesses and survivors. It must obtain explicit and informed consent if it is to hand over the records to Tusla. Many of the witnesses have not been given a copy of the report, as the Minister promised they would. I understand a number of the councils have been issued apologies, but there have been no copies of the report made available through their library services. The Minister promised the survivors a copy of the report and they must not be left wanting or waiting for that. He cannot in good faith dissolve the commission without accountability to the victims and survivors. I apologise for going over time.

Senator Emer Currie: It is a month since the report of the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes was launched and since the State apologised for how our most vulnerable were failed, shamed and traumatised, institutionally, systematically and holistically. The report could have offered survivors some ownership or empathy but disappointed many because of its detached and legalistic tone. We as a Government wanted the 22 actions coming from the report to be the start of a process of healing for what I can only imagine is a huge amount of pain, pain from being alienated and stigmatised by those who should have cherished and protected them. What happened to survivors was unnatural, unchristian and unforgivable.

When the report of the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes was launched, it was to be the beginning of a process of redress and reconciliation and not shutting the door on their pain and our shame. Unfortunately, what says shutting the door more than deleting testimony without full clarity and consent? I understand the Minister will afford an opportunity to those who gave their testimonies to rectify the inaccuracies in the official record of their contributions where there is dispute as to what was said or how it was portrayed. I look forward to seeing that.

I do not think that it matters that it was the commission, acting independently, that chose to delete the audio recordings of the statements made to the confidential committee and did not keep transcripts. What matters is whether those recordings are gone and irretrievable. What matters is that survivors might be let down and that their unmet needs of the past still will not come first. Meeting their needs must come first. If we have the opportunity to rectify that as a Government, we must do it and do everything we can.

I know that the Minister was speaking on the radio this morning. I welcome the fact that he is working on the interdepartmental group on restorative recognition with a report due back by the end of April. I welcome the broad approach he is taking and that it will be underpinned by human rights consultation and previous learnings and will include wider supports and not only financial supports. I know that he is absolutely committed to the 22 actions in the report,

including access to birth and early life information, the reclaiming of data and information, and information and tracing legislation. I know he will ensure a dignified burial for the babies who perished. The work that he is doing through the collaborative forum, setting out a workable structure of engagement with survivors, is critical. I ask him for a timeline now that we are one month on from the publication of the report.

The process of reconciliation works best when it is reciprocated, when people are able to tell their truth and feel that they are truly heard. As a Government, we cannot rest until the process for doing that is achieved. As part of our collective history, these events must be memorialised and preserved so we never forget the wrong that was done.

My question for the Minister relates to the extension of the commission, given all the emails we have received. What can be achieved by extending the commission? If it can give any peace, offer any respite or answers to survivors, of course it should be considered. I also heard what he said this morning about how difficult it was to conduct the judicial investigation and truth-telling process in the one inquiry. I understand that and think it is important, going forward.

I am glad that Ireland has transformed in the past 30 years but all trauma carries forward. These events are part of our identity and there can be no hiding from the pain that was caused. We have to own that. The Minister is my constituency colleague and sometime competitor. While the words of the report could be cold and uncaring, he and the Government are not. I welcome the update that he will give us later. I heard his words on the radio this morning. I hope that we can get this right and that the 22 actions are our main focus. We must not let down the survivors.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I thank the Leader for facilitating further debate because this is an important issue. Many Senators wanted to come in and talk about the issue. I thank the Minister for coming to hear us today.

It is one month since this report was published and it has been very difficult reading. I could only read it in parts at a time and cannot even begin to comprehend how difficult it must have been for the survivors of these institutions - I will not call them "homes" - to read that report. I have spoken to many survivors, some of whom are personal friends, about the report and their experiences within these institutions. It is a really difficult history with which
2 o'clock this country has to come to terms. We have had a dysfunctional relationship with women, reproductive health and sexuality in this country. We are only now coming to terms with those issues and we are not fully there yet. This report is an important step towards somewhat acknowledging what went on. What happened in mother and baby homes casts a long shadow over every town, village and family in this country. It is a collective trauma and shame on this country. We need to do right by those people now to try to correct what happened.

There was definitely a class dimension to what happened to people in these institutions. What struck me was the number of very young children who gave birth when they were children themselves.

They were clearly raped or abused and were extremely vulnerable, and nothing was ever done. This probably ruined their whole lives. That was a difficult aspect for me to read. The infant mortality rate was truly shocking. As a mother who has given birth in recent years, read-

ing about the extremely difficult circumstances in which those women were forced to give birth was traumatic.

I have been talking to many people since the report was published and they raised two particular points with me, which some of my colleagues have raised here as well. The report should have been printed and sent by courier to everybody who gave testimony. Hard copies should have been available and they still are not. The decision not to print the report was a very Dublin-centric one. It assumed that everyone had good broadband and access to technology, and we know that is not the case. Arising out of the fact that many of the survivors of these homes had such difficult lives afterwards, they were not all in a financial position to equip themselves with that technology. Their lives have been blighted by this and they have suffered poverty and ill health as a result of their experiences. That was a big error and I hope it will be rectified.

The second point of contention was the very legalistic language around there being no evidence of forced adoptions. This caused great hurt because it is very clear from the report that coercion took place, that the women had no choice and that society afforded them no route to keep their babies. The report acknowledges all of that but the headline that was taken from this very large report and flashed around the place, which caused great upset, was that there was no evidence of forced adoptions. Clearly, there were no other options and that implies force in my book. That type of language should be changed.

I have a problem with the legislation under which this commission was set up, namely, the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004. The provision of the confidential committee was bolted on to that Bill and we never got any proper explanation of it. This ensured that witnesses would not be cross-examined and that the witness statements would only be used to give flavour to the report. The commission claims that the witnesses were informed of this, but many witnesses state that they were not. I would like representatives of the previous Government to explain to us why this Act was used when it was clearly inappropriate legislation for setting up such an investigation. There should have been an independent tribunal or inquiry. That decision by the previous Government has failed the survivors and it is based on that decision that we now have all these difficult issues with which we have to deal. They have to be addressed and I am waiting to hear what the most appropriate way to do that is. I do not know if extending the life of the commission will do it. We need to be very practical here and we should not play politics with this. The survivors just want answers and it would be wrong to go down the rabbit hole of giving survivors the false hope that, if we did this or that, everything would be all right. I want to know what we can do in practical terms.

A national monument and museum for survivors to visit has already been promised by the Taoiseach. If the survivors could give their testimony and if we could have an accessible record there for them, many of them would get solace from it. That needs to be incorporated into the museum. The Taoiseach has committed to that but there should be some other smaller monuments at the sites of Bessborough, Castlepollard and Tuam, for example. The 22 actions arising out of the committee also must be acted on without any delay.

I would like the Minister to bring back to the Cabinet that we need action on direct provision because it is the modern day institutionalising of very vulnerable people. I have been calling for this for a long time, as have others in this House. We need action. That is the only way we, as a society, can right these wrongs.

Senator Tim Lombard: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. This is a very important debate. It has been ongoing for a while but it is important that all Members of the House have the opportunity to express their views on this report.

I took time this morning to read again the paragraphs that I was going to talk about. I will refer to chapter 28 which deals with the county home in County Cork. There were two homes, the Bessborough home, which is a few miles away, and the county home in County Cork, St. Finbar's. The reading of the 27 pages of script in that section is frightening to say the least. There are many issues within that report that need to be aired and talked about. When one looks at Cork city and county at the time, it is frightening to think that that was the actual dynamic and thought process that was considered normal. I was very disappointed in reading the report itself that society was so deranged in so many of its views and its view of women in society, in particular, was absolutely frightening.

In reading the report, the local authority was involved directly from 1923 to 1941 in the running of that county home. Some 15 members of the local authorities, five from the county and five from the city, were directly involved, which has to be noted. In saying that, I wish to note and acknowledge the apology that the mayor of Cork County Council, Councillor Mary Linehan Foley, made last week on the issue. That was a very positive step. Mary had gone through the Bessborough home herself and has a great understanding of the issues but she acknowledged that the local authority had a hand to play in the running of these homes, in particular in the early years. When one looks at the death rates in these early years, it was absolutely frightening and is something which we must acknowledge. I hope that other local authorities that have not come forward yet will do so with a statement of apology and acknowledge what they were involved in.

My family has been involved in local government since the early 1960s. When I read the report I was thinking whether my uncle was one of these at the time, but he was not as it was prior to his involvement in local government.

The report highlights how Irish society was and how it viewed people, viewed women, what limited control the State had and the major control that society and religious society had over us. It is hard to engage with that from where we are today. I read this chapter three times this morning and it is hard to realise that this was actually Ireland. I was born in 1976 and this home was still open 12 years later. My God, it is unbelievable to think that society was running on that line when I was coming to my teenage years.

It is a frightening report and it is about trying to ensure that the survivors of these institutions have the ability to work with the State and to get what they need to progress with their lives. There are some very good stories but people are rightly scarred by what has happened to them and how let down they were by society, by the State and by the church, because they have been let down. Women, in particular, have been totally let down by this.

I was saying this to my mother, who is of a certain generation, and she said to me that this was a very fiery topic of conversation back in our house when we had the station in the 1980s. At that time we had the Kerry Babies case and all of that sparked a major debate. As a woman she was appalled by the views of society at the time. Again, I find it hard to relate to this. The world has moved on. This report is from a certain generation. My friends who read the report ask what and where society was at. This is terrible, but where were the men? Where were they? Why were they not standing up for their people, for their women? Some of this, obviously, was

abuse but not all of it and there is also a reality to this. Families let down their loved ones by not standing up for them. Where were the fathers and brothers? There was so much out there that it is hard to believe we let this happen. There are so many questions that need to be teased out.

There is a body of work to be done, as a Government, as a people and as legislators, to ensure what we can do to help them is done to the very best. People want answers. They want reports and they want to know what happened. They want to get their birth certificates and they want to get information. I hope this process will give that information and will give them what they need because they need closure.

Personally, this was the most harrowing report I have ever read as a public representative. I have been involved in politics since 2003 and I have never read a document like this. It is an unfortunate indictment of how society treated women for so long in this State.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I welcome the opportunity to contribute. Like others, I found the report harrowing reading. It documents what the vast majority of society knew but did not talk about. It was a different era, that we all recognise. There was a level of social conservatism. There was no place for women to express themselves; none whatsoever. Men ran the show. Women were, by and large, subservient, and children were expected to be seen and not heard. In truth, the same was expected of women. Men organised the meetings, they ran communities and society, they were elected and, indeed, they ran the church. Women did the housework, cooked the dinners and looked after the family, and while they were the bedrock of most families, their views and opinions were shunned. Women were told: “Whist up, woman, what would you know?”

That is the culture that existed, and it was propagated. It did not happen by accident in the first instance, and it did not manage to be maintained without the will of a certain set in society. The church and State set the agenda. I will define the church a little closer. It was clericalism that dictated the national moral code and the State, through its actions, policed that moral code.

It is hard to believe, when I look back from this vantage point in 2021, how this construct could have existed and how it could have been allowed to prevail. However, given all of the interests that were in control, how could it change? Why no one succeeded in being heard is beyond me from this vantage point, but the church and State were not alone. The checks and balances that any democracy would depend on through an independent media were, in the main, silent, with the exception of some, so they too, to an extent, failed in their duty to hold the State, its leaders and its elected representatives to account. Keeping up appearances of perfection trumped the reality of human interaction. That is a fact, but it was in the interests of some to continue with this outrageous pretence.

We are only now seeing in great detail the pain and suffering of the women and children. I read with interest the cruelty that was meted out to the survivors by people who we would have expected to be caring, compassionate and kind, some of them women themselves, when we look at the testimony of some in regard to the way they were treated by nuns. However, I cannot blame those lower down the food chain of the church. Quite frankly, within clericalism, the nuns were second-class citizens. That is a reality. They were just carrying out orders based on a moral code that was policed by the State. When one looks back, it is particularly difficult to see how it happened. One wonders what went on in the minds of the people who occupied these seats at the time. Having listened to the debate in this House and in Dáil Éireann, I am taken by the hollow tears shed by some who would champion a socially conservative ethos and

how, with the passage of time and the changed reaction to the behaviour of the time, they are now more embracing and are shedding tears for the survivors. This is fine, but some of them are the very same people who sat in these Houses a short number of years ago and tried in every possible way to block the Irish people deciding on what the laws of the State would be on the termination of a pregnancy. It was more of the same. It was happening in full view. It was the idea that we protect our country from abortion, when in truth Irish women, again in full view, were packing their bags to take the lonely trip to Liverpool and with the support of no one. Again, pregnancy was a women's problem just like it was back through the decades. I will be forgiven for taking some of those hollow tears with a grain of salt. I sat in this Chamber when I was jeered by people on all sides, as others also were, for taking what we thought was the right approach, which was to recognise that there were Irish women who were terminating pregnancies but doing so under enormous duress having taken a decision themselves and having to travel outside the State. There has always been a level of ambivalence in this House whereby people hold one eye on what their actions are and the second eye is held firmly on the ballot box. I suspect that the same happened then as it did here up until very recently.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank Senator Dooley. I call Senator Black and then Senator Carrigy. That concludes all of the Members offering on the approved list for contributing today.

Senator Frances Black: I welcome the Minister to the House. A total of 550 survivors of the mother and baby homes came forward to share their testimonies of living in hellish conditions. For this report to be published they provided personal accounts, consisting of their lived experiences, to the confidential committee module of the commission's work. It is so important that we acknowledge and understand how difficult it must have been for each of the individual survivors to speak out about their experiences in mother and baby homes. I shudder to think of the injustice of it, as I am sure the Minister also does. Only 75 of the 550 women had requested anonymity. Dr. Maeve O'Rourke rightly stated this week that anonymity "doesn't mean we won't fully transcribe your testimony, we will never give you a copy of what you said, we'll then destroy your audio, you won't be able to challenge our report."

Ireland's shame has now gained international interest, and rightly so, with headlines across the world focused on what we do next to do right by the survivors of the mother and baby home institutions. It is essential that we do not lose sight of the issues at play here. It is very easy to allow us to get caught up in the complexity and the often nebulous nature of political language. This conversation should always be about the interest of the survivors. The issue at play is getting buried in the complexity of political language and the avoidance of questions. If we are to get to the heart of this we need answers. There are many complex issues around what happened in the mother and baby institutions but we need to know on what basis was the evidence collected by the commission deleted. Furthermore, it is not possible to retrieve that information, as is the wish of the majority of the survivors. We need to understand on what legal basis was the deletion of testimonies carried out. It is also essential to understand if how the testimonies were to be dealt with was conveyed to the survivors when giving evidence. To carry out this report the experiences of 550 of the women giving testimony was, essentially, a reopening of the trauma and reliving of it in the present day. These women have suffered more than enough. The Government cannot fail these wonderful women any more. We are failing them through the lack of transparency, through false promises and with reports and commissions that never serve to heal but only to half-record and meddle with the past. We are failing these women through State apologies that place the blame for what happened for so long on society rather

than on the individuals and institutions who were genuinely culpable. When are we going to do the right thing by these survivors?

All of these half-hearted attempts to heal our hideous histories are undermined by the overwhelming lack of transparency. At the very least, it is essential that we see the record of the correspondence between the Minister and the commission as well as the correspondence between the Minister and the Attorney General, who he states has sought legal advice as to the deletion of the tapes. We need immediate clarity as to whether the testimonies of survivors have been destroyed. If this is the case, we need evidence to show that witnesses were made aware that their testimonies were going to be destroyed. Where these simple answers cannot be delivered quickly, it is essential that the mother and baby homes commission be extended. We must ensure that it is not dissolved on 28 February. We cannot allow the commission to be dissolved when 550 of these testimonies are absent. We cannot sit around and see another report into systemic institutionalised abuse in Ireland's past causing more trauma and problems rather than doing good. We have been down this road before with the Murphy report and with the McAleese report and its numerous omissions. Why can we not get our affairs in order and finally honour the horrific experiences of these survivors?

It is important to note that the destruction of evidence denies the survivors their ability to refute the commission's erroneous findings. Some of the claims the commission has made about these institutions are incorrect. The Clann project has a long-term commitment to seeking justice for the survivors and has spoken out about some of the erroneous findings of the commission about these institutions. One such finding was that the institutions provided a refuge.

The adoption rights activist, Noelle Brown, has stated that nobody told these women that their testimonies would be destroyed and that they did not consent to that. We need answers as to the legal basis for the deletion of the records. We need to know whether there were transcripts of these testimonies and if this important evidence can be recovered. We also need to see an extension to the timeframe of the commission. Where we cannot obtain answers promptly, our prerogative is to ensure that the commission is not dissolved without accounting for the missing tapes. The importance of retrieving these stories and testimonies is that it would allow those 475 of the 550 survivors who did not request anonymity the option to store their testimonies in an archive where a reflection of the history of what happened could be observed. What is most important is that these women are adequately commemorated.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Senator. We are keeping well within the time. Earlier today, I said that there was to be one last speaker, Senator Carrigy, but Senator Murphy is also on the official list approved by the whips and the leaders so I will call on him after Senator Carrigy, who has six minutes.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: First of all, I commend the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach on the statement he made to the House a number of weeks ago. I commended him on it personally but I want to put it on the record. The Minister is very welcome. The report highlights an abject failure of care by the State. It is important to thank the hundreds of brave women for telling their stories, which are so important to them, and for shining a light on their lives, histories and experience. Our response, as a State, must be supportive. We must support these women with opportunities and redress. Our support, as a Government, must be characterised by justice, compassion and respect. I acknowledge the apology from the CEO and cathaoirleach of Longford County Council. I urge all local authorities to follow their example.

Like many survivors and advocacy groups, I am deeply disappointed in the report and how it was handled. I refer to the lack of consultation, the leaking of the report to a national newspaper and the continuing issues with regard to access to records. Last October, as public representatives, we received thousands of emails ahead of the vote we held. Personally, supporters of a particular political party came to my home at night, when I was putting my children to bed, to place teddy bears at my private home, which is unacceptable. We voted to protect the database and the related records. We were there to protect them and now we are being told that the recordings have been destroyed. The commission's report states that 550 witnesses were asked for permission to record their evidence and that all such recordings have been destroyed. Section 43 of the Commissions of Investigation Act states that all evidence received by and all documents created by or for the commission have to transfer to the Minister. We were in a situation where evidence was recorded. The commission states that consent was given. Survivors have said they were not made aware at any stage during their interview with the commission that the recordings would be destroyed. At what stage was the Minister informed that the recordings were destroyed or would be destroyed? Was there any correspondence from the commission regarding this to officials in the Department?

I understand the commission is an independent body. However, I am disappointed that members of the commission refused to attend last week's meeting of the Joint Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration. I have major concerns about that. It is important that we get all the answers and that survivors get answers. Members of the commission should be asked to make themselves available on an ongoing basis. The report of the commission has caused upset, hurt and anger for all victims.

This is a very time-limited, sensitive situation, as the commission is due to be dissolved in a week's time. Once this happens, survivors feel they will get no answers. We must act now. I support Senator Buttimer and other Senators in their call for us to put whatever legislation is needed in place to extend the commission or to put in place a new commission to continue the work that needs to be done for the survivors of mother and baby homes.

Senator Eugene Murphy: The launch of the report was a landmark moment in Irish history, one which we must never forget because it shone a light on what was one of the darkest and most horrible periods. The women and children in mother and baby homes were treated like second-class citizens and they will bear the scars of their tortured past for the rest of their lives. I have no doubt about that.

It was shocking and heartbreaking to hear that more than 9,000 babies died in these institutions. The church, the State and, to a lesser extent, society bear collective responsibility for the abhorrent treatment of the mothers placed in these institutions. We must remember that this did not happen hundreds of years ago. It is extraordinary that it was going on in the 1970s and 1980s when we were growing up. At least I was a child at the time this was going on. It is incredible to think it was 1988 when it was announced that the last institution would close, although it probably did not close down until the 1990s.

Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, I can remember plenty of protests in this country about many important and relevant issues. It struck me when this report was released that I never saw a major protest on this issue. We are aware of the gravity of the situation now. We always heard people campaigning on it, but there were not many of them. That strikes me as appalling and terrible. Why was there not an outcry at the time?

Apologies from the Taoiseach and others are very important. I sympathise with the Minister to an extent because he has a huge responsibility and burden. I hear him doing media interviews and I am aware that it is very difficult for him. I know he is trying to do his best and will do his best but it now appears that some of this material has gone missing. People who gave their stories are very upset about that. I accept that some of them did not want their testimony to go into a public arena but, rather, wanted it to be kept private. A woman who contacted me told me that she did not want her grandchildren, who have a very happy relationship with her, to go through her testimony. I accept that. There is a significant number of people who are very upset that the material has been destroyed.

One is sometimes hit by a tsunami of emails on an issue. On an issue such as this I fully accept the reason for such emails, but it may put one off the real story. The remarks of the Acting Chairperson, Senator Boyhan, a couple of weeks ago made me think about this issue in a major way. He was very brave. I received several emails from people affected by this issue who asked me to phone them. I phoned all eight of them. These people are utterly broken. They told me they cannot hold down employment and that they are unhappy, distressed and upset. Unquestionably, much of that goes back to the way they were treated in those homes.

I will not delay the response of the Minister. I am anxious to hear what he has to say. Surely all present have a responsibility to do what we can to satisfy the majority of these people who are suffering great pain and have had great destruction of their lives. As far as I am concerned, they will never really be at peace but if we get this right such that they are satisfied, it would be a significant step forward.

I say “well done” to the Acting Chairperson with regard to his contribution on this issue. It was very moving and it struck a chord with many people. It took courage for him to make that contribution. I thank him for it. It is nice to see him chairing this debate.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Senator for his personal remarks. I appreciate them. I acknowledge the Cathaoirleach, who asked me to chair this debate. I consider that a great honour.

All Senators have received many emails and letters on this issue, as Senator Murphy mentioned. I received a very moving handwritten letter from Catherine Corless with several photographs accompanying it. I understand she wrote several handwritten letters. I wish to take this opportunity to single her out as a wonderful hero, champion and advocate on this issue. There have been many wonderful advocates.

A matter that came to my attention this week through correspondence and the media was the very moving apology by Councillor Mary Linehan Foley, the mayor of County Cork. She was in Bessborough and has walked this journey and struggled with it. She knows of the many disappointing setbacks along the way. She shared her emotion in her very moving apology. The cathaoirleach of Galway County Council, Councillor James Charity, gave a very moving statement, as did many other cathaoirleach and mayors around the country.

Many people have various stories. I always say there is nothing unique but this situation is unique. We all have our own personal and unique story and in some way we have all been touched by this issue through our own lives or those of our brothers, sisters and loved ones. If we really dig down, we will all find that we share an interest in this issue.

I acknowledge the Minister in the context of what is a very difficult situation. The report

makes for disturbing reading. As one who has travelled on this journey, I have significant regard for him. He has come with a clean pair of hands to this terribly sad situation. We have had three good, constructive and long sessions on this issue in the House, with 38 Senators contributing. I have no doubt we will revisit it. I thank the Minister for his time and for attending each of those sessions. The Order of Business states that the Minister shall have no less than ten minutes to wrap up. The House is scheduled to suspend at 3 p.m. I am not suggesting the Minister has to speak until then. I know he has ongoing engagements with Senators and Deputies.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank the Acting Chairperson for his kind words. I have appreciated the opportunity to come into this House on three occasions to hear at length and in depth from Senators from around the country. They have had engagements, experiences and conversations with people in their own areas who have been impacted by this situation and-or seen the impact of local mother and baby home institutions in those areas. It has been a valuable experience for me as I work on the Government’s response.

A number of Senators raised the issue of the deletion of audio files by the commission, and I want to address this first. I can understand the real anger felt by the 550 survivors who attended before the confidential committee when they learned of this. I have been working to find a solution to ensure that their voices are heard and protected. When I spoke to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on Tuesday, I stated that the commission had written to me to say that it believed that the tape recordings were not retrievable. I said then that I would continue to engage with the commission and I have done so.

The commission informed me yesterday that it had become aware of backup tapes held off-site, which may - and I must stress the word “may” - contain the audio files of the personal accounts given to the confidential committee. This followed my earlier request to the commission to exhaust all possibilities to retrieve data from the interviews, if those data still existed. I responded immediately to the commission to arrange for these tapes and their content to be made available urgently to my Department as part of the transfer of the archive that is beginning to happen. I am expecting a response from the commission to that request later today. I stress that I do not want to raise unduly expectations about these tapes. I very much hope they will contain the audio recordings of the 549 people who consented to be recorded but it will not be until the tapes have been retrieved, reconnected to the parent IT system and transferred to my Department that my Department will be able to ascertain this for a fact. We are all aware that sometimes technology can let us down. These tapes are backups in the form of disaster recovery tapes and that is their function. If the recordings are on those tapes, I will then have to decide, in light of the legal advice provided to me by the Attorney General, to what extent the material on those tapes can be made lawfully available. This is new information that I am giving to the House, and as soon as I get more information, I will continue to update Members of both Houses. I assure everyone that I am giving this situation my utmost attention to try to give a voice to survivors.

A number of Senators have also raised the issue of the extension of the lifespan of the commission. I said previously, and again at the meeting of the Oireachtas joint committee this week, that I am engaging with the Attorney General regarding this issue in respect of the legalities around that and the difficulties presented in that regard by the manner in which the Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters) Records, and Another Matter, Act 2020 is structured. I refer to the difficulties in changing the terms of reference, particularly after a report has been provided, but I continue to engage with the At-

torney General on this point.

I have also raised another question that is a concern for me. Last October, the Attorney General made the important decision that the GDPR applies to the archive of the commission investigation. That decision means that when that archive transfers to my Department, we will then be in a position to answer subject access requests, SARs, for not only the 550 survivors who gave testimony before the confidential committee but all survivors of mother and baby institutions and county institutions. Since that determination was made by the Attorney General, my Department has put in place a unit solely dedicated to the management of these SARs because we are very conscious of our responsibilities under the GDPR and of the need and the desire for survivors to obtain vital personal information about themselves. We are preparing for that, and when the commission's archive fully transfers to us by the end of this month, we will be in a position to start answering those subject access requests.

If the commission continues in existence, and if it is subject to investigations, it is going to need its archive, the entirety of its documents, to be able to answer those investigations. It cannot be investigated if it does not have the material to respond to any queries that come in. If the commission has the entire bundle of data, of files, that it has been using, we know that the commission has not been responding to subject access requests. If our goal is to get access to information for survivors, my belief is that that goal is best served by the commission archive moving to my Department and allowing subject access requests to be made and to be answered in the way that my Department has prepared for. That is a consideration but it is one of a number of considerations.

I want to talk about the report itself. Whenever I have spoken in this House, I have recognised that the language in the report is cold and legalistic, particularly in the executive summary chapter. I have also recognised that conclusions like those about the quality of the consent that mothers gave to adoption are incredibly hard to justify when one reads what is contained in the confidential committee's report and when one reads those personal testimonies, and they are incredibly difficult to reconcile with the lived experience of survivors whom I have spoken to, and whom I know many Senators have spoken to as well, and with what happened to them, especially mothers. What I have always said throughout all of this is that I believe the survivors, and I believe the Government believes the survivors. We believe their testimony and that testimony is stated clearly in the confidential committee chapter.

We also have to recognise, however, that within the 3,000 pages, there are valuable conclusions, valuable pieces of information, and valuable findings that enable the State and provide it with the foundation to move on and address certain issues, for example, the culpability of the State in what happened in these institutions, and the clearly documented failure of Departments and local authorities to respond to the public health reports that people like Alice Litster and others raised time and again and that were ignored time and again about high infant mortality rates or unacceptable physical conditions in specific institutions. We all knew there was a State failure but it is documented now in chapter upon chapter. That allows the Government, in the apology and in our actions subsequently, to say, yes, the State was and is culpable in this and that is why the Taoiseach apologised on behalf of the State.

The finding that so many infants died in these institutions, that the mortality rate was so incredibly high, allows me as Minister, and the Government, to engage with the religious congregations and say we have these findings and we are now asking them to step up in terms of an apology, a contribution to the restorative recognition scheme, and providing material such as

their records as part of the wider measures they need to take. If we write off the entire report, however, there is nothing for me or any future Minister to engage with these congregations on. The finding of the high infant mortality rate and that it was allowed to happen forms the foundation for those engagements and the information we have about specific mother and baby homes and what happened in the individual institutions. Senator Gavan mentioned Manor House and noted that it was a good analysis of what happened in that institution. I know, having spoken to survivors, that other survivors have highlighted how the institutional chapters have been able to highlight the practices that they were aware of and ensure they are on the record forever.

My view of those criticisms of the commission's text and of some of those conclusions is that the commission report is not the final statement on what happened in mother and baby institutions. The State has set out a plan with 22 action points in order not only to address this but also to provide mechanisms whereby we can continue to recognise the lived experience of mothers and children who were in these institutions. A national records and memorial centre, which the Government has committed to delivering, provides an opportunity in whatever way is felt best to express the lived testimony of survivors of these institutions.

As for the set of action points relating to memorialisation, whether it is the need for the institutional burials Bill for sites where we need to make a major intervention, such as in Tuam - that Bill will be before the Oireachtas committee, and I look forward to engaging with Senators and Deputies on the legislation and working to strengthen it - or whether it is in the context of smaller interventions in sites where perhaps survivors linked to the site believe it is a more dignified maintenance and delineation of the burial site in that institution; whether it concerns education and ensuring that what happened in these institutions is reflected in the educational curriculum - and I have engaged with the Minister, Deputy Foley, on that point - or whether it is in the context of access to information and the commitment to bring forward access to information and information and tracing legislation, including access to birth certificates, which we all know is so valuable, which is so sought-after by survivors and which is referred to in all the emails Senators have received recently, we have made a commitment that the heads of that Bill will be published by the end of March or in early April. That will then go to pre-legislative scrutiny. It will also go to consultation with wider groups that are interested in this area. I have said very clearly that the approach taken to this will not mirror the approach taken to previous legislation. It will centre on that GDPR right of somebody to access their personal information. That is central to what we are seeking to achieve in the legislation and also in the context of access to the information contained in the archive of the commission, to which I have referred already.

The State has apologised. It has recognised its enormous failures and how the human rights of the women who were sent to these institutions and the children who were born there were breached. I said on the day of the apology, particularly in the context of a redress scheme or restorative recognition, that any scheme of financial redress will never compensate for what happened. The Government does not think, and I do not think, we can ever compensate for what happened. The State broke the trust between it and the women and children who were in these institutions. The State is now putting forward these actions as the first steps towards seeking to rebuild that relationship of trust. There is a lot of work ahead. Some of those actions will take a significant amount of time; others, we hope, can be delivered quickly. I am aware, though, that time is of the essence because so many of the former residents are of an age where they need to be able to avail of access to information and of an enhanced medical card. That is the job of work that is before the Government and before my Department but also before both Houses of

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the Oireachtas. I know everybody wants to do right by survivors and wants to work together to achieve these actions for survivors. I have committed, and continue to commit, to working with Senators and Deputies across all parties so we can do our very best and make good the failings of the State that have been manifest from this report.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Minister. We must wrap up at this point.

Senator Sharon Keogan: Does the Acting Chairperson mind if I ask the Minister one thing? He gave a commitment at the committee on children-----

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I apologise to the Senator but I cannot really ask anyone else. Perhaps she can have a word with the Minister afterwards.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I will speak to the Senator afterward.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): That is okay. I thank the Minister. That concludes statements on the report of the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes.

Sitting suspended at 2.50 p.m. and resumed at 3.15 p.m.

Student Nurses (Pay) Bill 2021: Order for Second Stage

Bill entitled an Act to make provision in relation to the pay of student nurses.

Senator Annie Hoey: I move: “That Second Stage be taken now.”

Question put and agreed to.

Student Nurses (Pay) Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]

Senator Annie Hoey: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I am sharing time with Senator Sherlock. I am proud that today a student issue is the subject of the first piece of legislation I have brought to this House. I hope that the Senator for students is earning her stripes.

The Student Nurses (Pay) Bill 2021 is very simple. Its purpose is to ensure a rate of pay for student nurses when they are working commensurate to the rate of pay of a healthcare assistant, HCA. Since being elected to the Seanad in April 2020, in the midst of a global health crisis, I have been imploring the Ministers for Health and Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to recognise the role being played by our student nurses and midwives. I have raised the matter in the Chamber numerous times. I have raised it in the health committee. I have asked the HSE and both Ministers about the matter in writing. I have done everything I can to keep this issue on the agenda. I have said it before but it bears repeating that a bualadh

bos mór is not enough for our student nurses and midwives. They have been working at the coalface of this pandemic and caring for vulnerable patients on Covid-19 wards. What is more, they have done all of that while knowing that being on those very wards puts themselves far and above the average risk of contracting Covid-19. I will also take a moment to address an issue that has been raised with me. Despite working - yes, I believe that what student nurses and midwives do is actual work and I will not be shifted from that view - according to reports given to me by student nurses and midwives, the vaccine roll-out has not included student nurses and midwives in their first, second and third years. Not only are we expecting them to work for free during a global pandemic, we are also adding insult to injury by not including the first, second and third years in the early vaccination roll-out. That is disgraceful.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): That is not true. They are included.

Senator Annie Hoey: Student nurses have said to me that they were told they were unable to avail of the vaccine because they were students in their first, second or third year of study. There could be a miscommunication where some student nurses have been told they cannot avail of it.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: We will certainly check that out.

Senator Annie Hoey: I thank the Minister. Even now that their placements have been suspended, many student nurses and midwives are back in hospitals working as healthcare assistants. When offered the opportunity to stay at home or find work elsewhere, many have gone back into hospitals, which is incredibly admirable. A student described it to me as:

Terrifying, stressful, feel unsupported, feel as if I am a staff nurse and not an intern - 8 of my patients tested positive for covid, all staff nurses present were identified as close contacts and told to isolate - I was not. I had to continue to work for the 2 weeks of the ward outbreak. In A&E placement as supernumerary student 7 staff nurses were out sick due to Covid, myself and 4 other students had to take their place ignoring our supernumerary status especially in a specialised area.

It is not just during Covid that student nurses have played their role. They have been an essential part of the healthcare system for years. It should not have taken us reaching this point in a global health crisis to recognise their contribution, but to refuse to do so now would be shameful.

All work should be paid. I cannot believe that in 2021 as a Labour Party Senator, trade union activist and citizen, that still needs to be said, but here we are. No part of our public service system should be built on the back of unpaid labour and I will brook no argument from the Government that what student nurses and midwives do is not work. Nor, by the way, would their colleagues, their patients or the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, so let us put that idea to bed. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, then it is a student nurse doing actual, life-saving work for free. For the Government to say otherwise is simply gaslighting a whole cohort of student nurses and midwives.

This Government is fond of praising our student nurses but in the same breath it uses to acknowledge the work they are doing, it refuses to commit to paying them. One of the many straw man arguments I hear is that nurses are taking part in a university degree, not an apprenticeship, and that we do not want to devalue their qualifications. This argument is nonsense and tosh. There is nothing at all undermining about paying students for work they complete as part

of their training. What is undermining is to say to student nurses that they will remain unpaid while they work in hospitals, to somehow protect them and their qualifications. That does not protect them at the end of the month when they have rent to pay; it does not protect them from Covid-19; it does not protect their well-being; and it does not protect the Irish healthcare system from a reputation of undervaluing its nurses, which starts from the beginning of their careers as students. Another student nurse said to me:

My biggest issue throughout most of this year is feeling like I'm more like a HCA rather than a student nurse, the nurses are walking angels but they are tied up in the endless work. Are teaching and learning has been pushed to the side because of covid and not getting the supports needed from the government.

I also want to speak about the nature of education and what requiring students to work for no pay does to the system. I have said this in the House previously and I will say it again. We have an obligation to ask who is not here, who is not in the room and who is not partaking in these educational opportunities. When it comes to nursing and midwifery, who is not able to undertake this course of study? Many people, due to their socio-economic background, their family obligations and their needs outside of education, must work throughout college. I know first-hand what that is like, having worked more hours for many years in college than I spent in lecture halls. When a service requirement is placed on students, as is done with nursing, it reduces the number of hours available to a student to earn a wage elsewhere in paid employment. This is a factor in people's decision-making when applying to college and so we have put people in a position where they are asking themselves whether they can actually afford to become a nurse. That is not how we should approach this vocation and this educational opportunity. We have a nursing shortage in Ireland. When talking about this issue, we need to remember that we are not discussing an abstract idea. We are talking about real people on the front line of the health service, year in, year out.

In the run-up to today's debate, I asked student nurses and midwives to share their experiences of working across wards in Ireland. I received a large number of responses and I am happy to share them with anyone who is interested. The first states:

As a 19-year-old, I have witnessed more people die in the past 12 months than I can count. I have sat beside them holding their hands, head to toe in PPE, in the exact moment they passed away. I think this is something that is extremely overlooked. 18 and 19 year olds have to look someone in the eyes at the exact moment they die. It is something that has kept me awake for many months. Supervision and support has crumbled despite staff's best efforts due to high absence rates. Learning is taking a backseat to get the basic care needs fulfilled. Academic aspects of the training have become much more difficult with inequality and access to online learning plus the pressure of isolation, parenting, etc., during the pandemic.

Another student who is in second year got in touch with me:

At the moment us second years are moving placement settings every two weeks. This is obviously dangerous during Covid but it is still happening. In January they refused to test us for Covid before we moved placement even if we had been caring for Covid patients. Students begged for tests as they did not want to spread the disease into other hospitals. It has been hell on earth so far. I always feel like I was put into the deep end of the pool. Sometimes you feel as if you have no support at all. While all of this was happening the

Government are telling us that we do not do real work, that we are being educated. I have been doing real work on wards since first year but even more so this year when the wards and hospitals were being propped up by students.

When I asked a student what her experience had been over the past 12 months, she said to me:

It has been significantly worse than previous years. I feel like there is a lot more expected of me. As a supernumerary student, over the past 12 months I have always been counted as a member of staff on the ward. I have been delegated a minimum of six patients a day, and it has gone up to 12, to care for with little or no supervision or support. Not only am I under severe financial strain but I am also emotionally drained and stressed from the experiences on placement. It really upsets me how much we are taken for granted and not provided with basic supports.

Another student has said:

I had to move out of home to avoid the risk of my family contracting Covid so I am now paying rent on an apartment. I have to get taxis more often as a result of the reduced public transport service schedule and the irregular work hours that I have to work.

Another student said to me:

It feels like I am never off duty. There has been a drastic increase in responsibility due to the pandemic and the staffing issue as a result of this pandemic.

Another student said:

Full of uncertainty. I am uncertain that I chose the right career path. We can't have student nurses feeling that they chose the wrong career path because of how we are treating them. I am considering moving abroad when I finish my degree due to poor pay and working conditions. I constantly feel underappreciated and sometimes I feel like I am a burden when I am on placement. Nurses on the ward do not have enough time to give me to help me achieve my learning goals. I feel like I am just another number to help out when staff are under pressure.

One final story states:

It is hard to break it down for other people to understand the stress and heartache we have experienced. The main experience of me was being the only person in the room with the Covid-positive patient when he passed from the virus. I was the only one holding his hand and talking to him as he slipped away, not his family, not as friends, just me as a student nurse. This has had a huge effect on me as I had built a bond with him over the week and to see him go so downhill so quickly was hard to process. Afterwards I helped prepare his body and that was how he will be buried. I had to help transfer them over to the morgue as we were short-staffed from all sides. When I returned from the morgue I was expected to go on with my day as if nothing had happened.

Those are just some of the stories from student nurses and midwives on the front line and these are student nurses all the way from first year up to supernumerary year. It is not fair to say that the workload is just falling on fourth year students. It is falling on first, second and third year students as well.

The campaign to see student nurses paid for their work did not start with me. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation has been fighting for years for their members' work to be recognised. I thank them, especially Phil Ní Sheaghdha, for their tireless work on behalf of their members. The Union Students in Ireland, my *alma mater* and my stomping ground to politics, has also been working tirelessly on this issue for years and it is how I got involved in this campaign. I also thank all the student nurses who have taken their time to talk to me about this Bill, and for sharing their very honest, real and painful insights with me.

It was implied this week in the media that the Government plans to allow this Bill to pass and then die out on Committee Stage. I want to put the Government, the Minister for Health, and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on notice that the Labour Party, the unions which represent these students, the student nurses who are affected by this and, I can assure the House, I will not be letting this issue die. I thank the House.

Senator Marie Sherlock: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach. It is good to have the Minister in the Chamber for this very important Bill and I am delighted to be seconding it. I take a very simple approach to the issue of student nurses.

At the heart of this Bill is the fundamental question of what constitutes work. If we define work as a contribution by a person to the operation or functioning of a service or a facility, or the production of a good, then that gives us some insight into the situation of student nurses at this point. By definition, no worker should ever be put in a situation where he or she is forced to work without pay or without recognition of the contribution he or she has made to the particular workplace he or she finds himself or herself in.

It is also important to recognise there is a very significant distinction between a placement where somebody is shadowing a trained, experienced worker and a situation where somebody is actually working in his or her own right. The reality in Irish hospitals is that there are first-, second-, third- and fourth-year student nurses who are working. From the hundreds of stories that have come to the attention of Senator Hoey and the Senators and Deputies in the Labour Party, the reality is that these students are working on wards in this country. Students tell us about having to tend to patients on their own. A third-year student talked about having to sit and explain to a dementia patient why staff are wearing masks and having to spend time with that patient. Another said she felt she was being treated as just another number and was there to help out when staff are under pressure. A second-year student talked about being told to break the bad news to a family. A third-year student said she was given the responsibilities of a qualified midwife.

There is a reason for all of this, namely, the huge staff shortages in hospitals at this time. Over the past 12 weeks, we have had 14,322 instances of Covid among healthcare workers in our hospitals. Nurses and healthcare assistants comprise more than 50% of that number. These are figures the Minister knows well. The one to which I refer means that more 7,000 workers and their close contacts are isolating, with the vast majority having to stay out of work for a period and this is obviously putting enormous pressure on the health system. It is not realistic to expect that student nurses have the luxury of being able to shadow trained workers. They are having to work and contribute to what is being done.

The Government faces a choice of either saying that student nurses should not be working and to take a black-and-white view of this or recognising the reality that student nurses are working in hospitals because of the shortage in numbers. What I find ironic is that last

March the then Government saw the need to offer healthcare assistant contracts to student nurses whose placements were suspended in recognition of the need to put as many resources as possible into the Irish hospital system. Of course, that system has ended and we now have this middle ground where student nurses are working but are being told by the Government that they are not really working.

The Minister finds himself in a situation whereby he has inherited a huge staffing deficit within the hospital system. That deficit has been massively exacerbated by the pandemic. We know there will be pressures within the hospital system over the coming years and that, because of ageing and the incidence of chronic disease, the staffing demand will be enormous. There have been repeated calls for many years by SIPTU, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation and other unions working in the health sector, calling for a significant ramping up of recruitment, yet the pace of progress has been way too slow. The reality of why student nurses are working at the moment is that we do not have enough people working in the hospitals. We are asking the Minister to recognise that reality and to pay student nurses in the here and now.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I welcome the Minister. This is a very important debate. It is worth pointing out that the approximately 4,000 student nurses and midwives are female in the main. The value of work done by women has been historically undervalued and there is a gender pay gap, as we all know. This may be why there has been a reluctance for so long to deal with the issue of pay for student nurses. Ógra Fianna Fáil ran a campaign on the payment of student nurses. I have spoken to them about the campaign and it is one I am in agreement with.

I have spoken to many student nurses over recent months. They recalled the very difficult situations, work environments and work practices they are now dealing with. When the majority of those students put nursing on their CAO forms, they did not expect to be working like this and in these circumstances. They are dealing with death, stress, falling ill, their colleagues falling ill, and the ever-evolving pandemic situation. The majority of these student nurses are 18 to 20 years old. My colleague, Deputy Lahart, has said that if this virus is a war situation, the student nurses are the conscripts and we should be paying them.

I have heard from student nurses about their difficult living conditions in shared accommodation and the stress of trying to self-isolate, including the effect this has on their relationships with their housemates. The student nurses are working in very Covid-sensitive environments. Due to reduced public transport services, they have had to get private transport.

I have heard the argument that student nurses are on work placements like many other third level students. I believe that in the current situation, they are not the same as other students on work placements from college. Other students have not faced the very difficult situations the student nurses and student midwives have faced. I have also heard the argument from many nurses and other senior people in the profession that they are very conscious of the strides that have been made in the past 20 years in professionalising the sector. I understand where they are coming from. I am eager that the professionalisation of their profession would remain and that the aims they work towards would continue. I feel, however, that an *ex gratia* payment for a defined 12-month period would be the happy medium. It would give the student nurses and student midwives the support they need at the moment, while respecting the professionalism of nursing and respecting the model that nurses fought so very hard to achieve, and without setting back the profession. I believe we can come up with a creative solution. The student nurses I have spoken to are very eager that the professional model is maintained.

We need to come up with something. How we treat student nurses and student midwives now will reflect on their attitude towards the Irish health service. It will help to inform their decisions when they graduate with their degrees in a few years' time. Ireland has a shortage of nurses and midwives. We are the fastest growing country in Europe and we need to recruit more healthcare staff. It would be far more cost-effective to pay student nurses now and not engage down the line in trying to recruit people from abroad with expensive campaigns to attract Irish nurses and nurses of other nationalities back to these shores to deal with our very young population and our ageing population.

I hope that some middle ground can be found here that respects the integrity of the profession, acknowledges the situation we are in and acknowledges the very difficult situation faced by the 4,000 student nurses and student midwives.

Senator Martin Conway: I thank Senator Hoey for tabling this Bill. Given the Senator's years of dedication to student politics with the Union of Students in Ireland, it is appropriate that it would be a students' pay Bill she would bring to the House as, hopefully, the first of many Bills she will bring to the Houses of the Oireachtas. I also welcome the Minister to the House. He is doing a very difficult job. I have no doubt that he is putting every hour he can find or muster into his role in dealing with the pandemic. To be fair, I believe he appreciates the enormous commitment of student nurses during this pandemic. It is my considered view that we would be lost without them because they stepped up to the plate and played a significant role. They did it willingly and there was no issue. They were quite happy to do it. It is appropriate that they were paid for this work. It is my view that they should continue to be paid when they are working. They have been working and, I have no doubt, will be working during the course of this pandemic. That is appropriate.

Professor Tom Collins was hired to carry out a short snappy review. He probably had to complete it too quickly to come to an overall considered view but pandemics move fast and the Minister needed a body of opinion. Professor Collins gave a view although it was not universally accepted. It was, however, a good starting point.

I wish this Bill well. Like most Private Members' Bills that come before the House, it is once it passes Second Stage that the real work starts. That is when engagement starts and when the discussions and collaborations take place. Everybody in this House wants a resolution to this issue. The Bill provides a framework for finding such a resolution. I know the Minister's officials are very busy at the moment but perhaps they might be able to find time to engage with Senator Hoey and her researchers to find common ground so we can continue in the spirit of not dividing on such an important issue.

We need to have a conversation about the overall working conditions of nurses, midwives, student nurses and other people who work in the healthcare profession over the coming months and years. I stay in a hotel in Dublin when I am up in the city and a number of nurses stay in the same hotel. The difference is that they are living there. They are doing so for safety reasons. They are away from their families and away from normal life. They are dedicating themselves to remaining safe and in a position to work. They are defining and designing their off time around that goal. It is easy to forget how lonely it can be for some of these people living in a hotel on their days off when they are not working. It is not the most pleasant environment.

The healthcare workers in the health system have also gone above and beyond the call of duty in providing essential services. The people who clean the hospitals have an absolutely

critical role to play, a role they have been playing for a long time and particularly during this pandemic. The porters have also played a very important role. The whole healthcare community has been elevated significantly in the public's admiration. That now needs to be reflected by better working conditions. The last thing we want to see is nurses qualifying in this country and then taking flight to Australia and other countries. Every young person wants to travel and it is good for them that they do so, but we want them to come back within a reasonable period and not just as a pandemic descends upon us and we run campaigns around the world begging them to come home. They should want to come home. They should feel they are respected, wanted and appreciated. That is something everybody wants in life but, sadly, it has not been the case. The other major issue relates to overcrowding in accident and emergency units and so on. It is not just pay, which is important, but working conditions as well.

When the Minister gets a chance perhaps he would update us on where we are with the 90-bed modular unit for University Hospital Limerick. I know it is in the capital plan but perhaps there is a timeline. I do not expect him to have the answer today but he might communicate with me in writing and provide me with an update. Some capital projects are in the programme for Government. They are recognised by all parties as being critical and we should fast-track them.

I wish the Bill every success. It is very timely. I look forward to discussing it again when we move on to Committee Stage.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister to the House. I thank Senators Hoey and Sherlock and all of the Labour Party Senators for proposing this important Bill. I am encouraged that Senators from both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have broadly welcomed it. Seeing it through to implementation is a different test, however, and only time will tell what will happen in that regard.

We know there are immense burdens on the Minister. I do not doubt his credentials in terms of his absolute commitment. It is a very difficult time for anyone to take on the role of Minister for Health. I will not quote all the suggested titles for that Ministry but we know it is a difficult one. I believe it is the hardest portfolio at this juncture. Covid has impacted on all of our professional and family lives, and on commerce and everything else in this country. We do not really know what is coming down the tracks. There are challenges coming our way daily. It is not easy, and I acknowledge that and the Minister's important work.

I also acknowledge the enormous emotional and psychological difficulties, pressures and burdens that fall on healthcare workers. Senator Conway referred to porters, cleaners and those who prepare food. The entire community of health workers is under enormous pressure. Student nurses are also under enormous pressure. I will not go into great detail because Senator Hoey directly quoted some of the people she has engaged with. I acknowledge the work she has done in that regard and her professional, in-depth drilling down into the issues. She did that very well, as she always does. She spoke to people in person. There is no better way to demonstrate the issues than to have personal testimony from people who are on the front line. Let us face it; this is the battle line. Those who are on the front line of the health service are saving the lives of citizens. They are holding the hands of loved ones, which is something that we should be doing but we cannot get into the hospitals because of the Covid restrictions. They stay with these people and afford them dignity until they breathe their last in this world. What a sad situation. Many nurses, fully trained and student nurses, go far beyond the call of duty.

There are also trained and trainee midwives. We know about the enormous difficulties people experience when they go in for what should be a joyous celebration of birth, new life and new people. Sometimes there are complications around that, and it is another harrowing experience not only for the expectant mother but also for the nurses and care workers. We are all on the same page. I do not see why there is a difficulty. Next week, we will be talking about another group of people who are underpaid. It is important that we recognise that people should be rewarded for their hard efforts.

I thank the INMO for the responsible attitude it has shown in difficult and challenging times. In many ways, the INMO has been very moderate. I know the organisation is sometimes criticised by its members because of its reasonableness and modern approach. We owe a deep gratitude to student nurses and all who train in hospitals. They should be recognised for their hard work and special bedside training. Up to ten years ago, there was traditional training and formation in place for nurses. I know nurses now have both a practical and academic basis for their training and they also do course work. Time and again, these trainees are on the front line experiencing trauma and working long hours way beyond the call of duty and expectation. However, they have not complained. They have stepped in and they have stepped up to the plate and supported their colleagues.

It is important that we send a clear message on this issue. I know there are difficulties and constraints in the context of finance and remuneration, but these student nurses are of critical importance at this juncture when there are so many challenges around the health service. Members of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have spoken in broad acceptance and support of the terms of the Bill. I have no doubt that other Senators will do likewise when they have an opportunity to speak. I thank the Labour Party for putting this issue on the agenda. I have no doubt that its Senators will not leave it at that but, rather, will pursue it. I thank them for that.

I wish to acknowledge the work of the Minister. It is easy to be critical of a person who is in authority and leading from the front as the Minister is doing. He does not have an easy task. He was not in his role at this time last year. It is not easy, but he is on the front line of health-care, as were previous Ministers, and has taken many knocks and bangs. He faces challenges every day. I do not doubt his commitment but it is important that he, as the leader of the health services in terms of policy, and the practitioners are in unison and support each other rather than battling against each other. It is that strength and solidarity that will bring about greater confidence in the health service.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: The Minister is very welcome. It is great to have him in the House to discuss such an important issue. I thank Senator Hoey for bringing this issue to the floor of the House, as she has done many times. On behalf of the Green Party, I am delighted to support the Bill and all of the work she has done on this issue.

A crucial matter in this context is that the INMO has stated that nurses are the ones most deeply impacted by Covid, not just in terms of what they are seeing on the floors of hospitals, but also in terms of suffering as a result of contracting Covid-19. That is really important because when we think of an education system, we have to think of it in terms of empathy. In any form of education, empathy is key to what we teach young people. In order to teach empathy, one must show empathy. That may be where things have fallen down in the past.

As Senator Clifford-Lee noted, a critical point is that it is mainly women who are engaged in these caring roles in midwifery and nursing. These roles are taken for granted. Being able

to discuss them freely on the floor of the Seanad is very important. However, we have to go beyond repeatedly discussing this issue; we need to show our support in a concrete way. It is not just about showing our recognition, it is also about who can afford to go into these kinds of careers. If it is not made affordable, it will be more and more difficult to get people into the profession.

This issue is not just about this generation. It is also about honouring the service people provide and thereby ensuring that future generations will take up this honourable profession. I certainly believe that all of the commitments in the programme for Government depend on that, as does Sláintecare. It depends on putting in place supports for the human resources and not just the infrastructural supports about which we often speak.

The Minister is to be commended for seeking a review on the clinical placement allowances but, as many Senators have stated, it does not go far enough and it is not fully implemented, so there is work to do in that regard. He is also to be commended for indicating that he believes it should be backdated. That is an important part. Those who have been engaged throughout the pandemic should be paid for their work. I also refer to what Senator Sherlock said about this issue coming down to what is considered to be work. That is critical, because we have seen during this pandemic that the work of student nurses is not just about shadowing people. From my own circle and from my constituents, I know that people are in hospital to give birth or for some other reason, and they do not have anyone else there with them. Therefore, a great deal of work is going on beyond what nurses and midwives usually undertake, and that also has a knock-on effect on student nurses who are working during this time.

It is also important that we protect the clinical placement part of the education of student nurses. One criticism that has been made in this regard is that people will have to do catch-up in this area. I am interested in hearing how it is planned to address this issue. We must ensure that everybody is getting all their placement time, because we do not want to have that legacy again in our health service but also purely because the young people involved must feel the education they receive is the same as that received by previous generations. I thank the Minister for his time and I look forward to hearing his response. I again thank Senator Hoey and the Labour Party for introducing this legislation.

Senator Paul Gavan: I am sharing time with Senator Warfield.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Paul Gavan: The Minister is very welcome to the House. I congratulate my colleagues in the Labour Party on introducing this excellent, simple and straightforward Bill. This issue really should not be occupying our time because it should have been sorted out long before now. It is about fair, reasonable and sustainable rates of pay and allowances. This issue was first raised with the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, by Sinn Féin on the floor of the Dáil in July 2020. A Sinn Féin motion before the Dáil last month calling for payment of student nurses was passed. Despite other political action by the Opposition as well, this action still has to be fought for. This is an issue which should not divide us. This House should be united on this matter, and, indeed, it appears today that we are united. I urge the Minister to act on this united message.

I state that because, unfortunately, it is clear to date that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party have not yet recognised the role of student nurses and the value they provide. An

allowance of €100 per week for first, second and third year student nurses and midwives has quite rightly been regarded as a slap in the face and far from adequate. It is not fair and reasonable. My union, SIPTU, has stated it fully supports the demand for the recognition of the role undertaken by all students within the health system during this pandemic and “the proposal that it should amount to a payment of €100 a week falls well short of what is needed”.

Let us compare and contrast this €100 with the decision made in the halls of power in this State last month to give the incoming head of the Department of Health a pay rise of €81,000. I refer not to a salary of €81,000 but to a pay rise of that amount, which brings the salary of the individual concerned close to €300,000 a year. As I recall, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, justified this on the basis of ensuring quality. If that ensures quality, he is obviously not in any way interested in quality for front-line essential workers. It is quite scandalous and it tells us much more about where this Government places value, which is at the very top of society, when we have heroes working on the front line not getting any pay. It is a scandalous situation.

The INMO has stated that student nurses “are thanked for their work so far but the thanks ring hollow when their reasonable demands for fair remuneration go unanswered”. Student nurses have the miraculous ability to survive on good intentions. I wonder could the new head of the Department of Health survive on these platitudes and such praise. It would save the State a fortune if he did. Student nurses are required to complete 35 hours of work a week over three to four days. The day starts at 7:30 a.m. for handover, where students get patients out of bed and take their vital signs. The rest of the day includes making beds, dressing patients, washing them and assisting them in going to the toilet.

In December, I read the story of Áine Murphy, a third year general nursing student at the University of Limerick. Since September, she has been working as an unpaid nurse on placement in University Hospital Limerick. Ms Murphy has been quoted as saying:

We are out on the front line. We are there every morning at the crack of dawn making sure your loved one is okay. We are risking ourselves with the possibility of getting COVID-19. Some of us have had to move away from home for work and don't go home or see our elderly relatives for fear that we may have it and pass it on.

How we treat those in healthcare really reflects the type of society we have and the place we have for professions that help and heal those most in need. Our health service was not in a good place before this pandemic. I could see it with the daily trolley figures in University Hospital Limerick, which often had the highest numbers in the State.

The Government needs to give a clear and direct message to student nurses and midwives that we want them to stay here working in the Irish healthcare system, not emigrating, that we value and respect the work they do on a daily basis and that there is a future here in a well-funded, modern public healthcare system.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I commend Senator Hoey on bringing forward this legislation and reading the testimonies of people on the front line into the record.

What is needed is a permanent solution with fair allowances to be put in place for student nurses and midwives. That should have been done yesterday, it should be done today and it should definitely be done before the next academic year 2021-22. I understand the Minister can do this at the stroke of a pen. The buck should not be passed to higher education institutions,

the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, NMBI, or anyone else. The Department should engage with the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation and other unions representing these students to put in place a reasonable and fair system of allowances. A fair system should also be put in place to address the needs of radiographers and others.

There is no more dangerous job on the front line than nursing. One sixth of Covid-19 cases were in the healthcare profession and healthcare worker community. Healthcare workers' lives have been put on the line, as previous speakers noted. We should also consider the message that would be sent to people contemplating a career in nursing if they knew they would be treated with fairness and respect. There should be no more excuses, hiding behind reports or talk. These students deserve action now and I call on the Minister and the Government to support Senator Hoey's Bill.

Senator Frances Black: I welcome the Minister to the House. I express my wholehearted support for this Bill and commend Senator Annie Hoey and the Labour Party on their dedication and commitment to honouring the student nurses who have so bravely worked on the front line from the beginning of this pandemic without any promise of pay. It is hard to believe we do not have legislation already in place to ensure student nurses and midwives are paid when they are working. This is a simple but essential Bill.

Student nurses and midwives have been thrown in at the deep end. They have worked tirelessly, as part of the front-line workforce, since the beginning of the pandemic. They have faced all of the fears and risks that any other member of the front-line services has faced, and continue to do so, without a guarantee of payment. We must ensure, through this legislation, that student nurses are no longer exploited. Student nurses have been used as full-time staff with no say in where they are placed and are worked at maximum effort but have received nothing in return. They have been exposed to the serious risk of contracting the virus in order to work on the front line. It is shameful that it has taken us this long, nearly a year after this started, to ensure that student nurses and midwives receive, at a minimum, the same rate as healthcare assistants. They certainly deserve that.

There are 4,500 student nurses working more than 36 hours a week. Since the beginning of 2021, we have seen the worst of the pandemic. I can only imagine how stressful that must be and the toll it is having on student nurses, particularly on their mental health. I have no doubt it is frightening. It is important to note that it is not only during this pandemic that student nurses have played a vital role in the healthcare system. For years, student nurses and midwives have worked numerous hours without pay. It is upsetting that it takes a global health emergency to realise that this is simply not right. Anyway, it is high time we paid our student nurses and midwives and had this enshrined in law. I believe any refusal to do so at this stage would be simply shameful and wrong. Now more than ever, I find myself reflecting on the bravery of the front-line staff and how selfless and brilliant they all are. We are really lucky to have a dedicated front-line staff. I know from my work on the committee, which Senator Hoey is on as well, that the challenges faced by front-line workers are at an all-time high, as I am sure the Minister is well aware. Two weeks ago the health committee heard from witnesses working on the front line who presented some of the problems they are facing as a result of their work. Their mental health in particular is really suffering and their energy is really low. Many are contracting the virus and after a year of battle, the general consensus is that they are completely and utterly exhausted. It is paramount, therefore, that we honour their work and the fight they continue to fight in order that we can enjoy our health.

I also wish to take this opportunity to commend the work of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, which last November launched an online petition that gained 20,000 signatures within two days and now has over 75,000 signatures. The petition was a clear example of the public solidarity when it comes to supporting student nurses and midwives. These student nurses and midwives are the future of our healthcare system and are at the beginning of their vocation. I just cannot imagine the emotional burden and strain each of them must feel stepping into this new arena during these unprecedented times. Some of them are living with elderly family members, all of whom are at risk of contracting Covid. We simply cannot allow these health workers to go on without any pay. It is just unacceptable.

I wish to highlight the case of Áine, who is a fourth-year student nurse. It is amazing that she says, “not to sound cheesy about it”, it is a really great honour to serve our country during this time. However, she has many friends who have contracted Covid. That is not an uncommon story. She says so many of them are very much at risk and are working in an environment that is unsafe. It is therefore more important now than ever to reward financially these workers for the valiant work they are doing to keep each of us safe by putting their health on the line. Again, I work with Senator Hoey on the health committee and the mental health committee and I know how passionate she is on this issue. I have to commend her on the phenomenal work she has done. She has done a fantastic online campaign on this as well, so credit where credit is due. I hope we can ensure that the work of all student nurses and midwives is both valued and paid.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I thank the Minister for coming to the House. I wish to take this opportunity to thank him for all the hard work he has done on Covid. He should congratulate himself and his staff in the Department of Health on the vaccine roll-out plan. People wrongly compare us with New Zealand regarding zero Covid, but when our vaccine roll-out is compared with New Zealand’s, they will start on Saturday with only 60,000 doses, so we need to look at ourselves and say “Well done”. As supplies come in, we seem to be administering the vaccines and we have to keep that point to the fore.

We are not here to discuss that today. I am here to commend Senator Hoey on her Private Member’s Bill. She clearly is the Senator for the students, as our Leader pointed out, and she is doing a fantastic job. I spent a lot of time in 2019 in hospital and got to know many nurses and midwives. I was taken aback by the midwives especially. Midwifery is now a four-year course, and some of the students are in their final year and in their very early 20s and they have so much knowledge and professionalism. The standard of care coming down the tracks is just unreal. It would be so unfortunate and just awful to lose these amazing people, and it was mostly women I dealt with. We know there is a recruitment and retention issue in the Department and within our health system, and it would just be careless to lose these amazing women. I got to meet many of them during non-Covid times. The majority of times, they were meeting me in an educational setting where they were with other nurses and midwives in a training environment. However, as Senator Hoey and other Members have pointed out, once Covid hit and we had a huge wave, these student nurses were placed in a precarious situation. They were put on the front line, working in dangerous Covid wards. Many of them contracted Covid. It is only fair that they be compensated for being put in those situations where they have a greater chance of contracting the virus. It is unfair that we are not taking that seriously. The points on this have been well made across the House. Just on a basic fairness level, we all know that not only our student nurses but also doctors and cleaning staff, indeed anyone working in a front-line environment, are facing huge challenges. The Covid situation is not receding. Only two days

ago St. James' Hospital issued an advance warning of mass screenings as it is having so many outbreaks due to people who are asymptomatic or presymptomatic. Covid is therefore still a very live issue and is still very much affecting our front-line workers. It has not gone away. The tide does not seem to be turning.

I thank our front-line workers and fully support the motion today on pay for student nurses, especially given the Covid environment. I hope the Minister can do something to compensate these amazing students, who are women in the main, although there are some male midwives and nurses. Women do seem, particularly in relation to Covid, to be disproportionately affected. I will leave it at that.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber and acknowledge the incredible work he has been doing over the past months tackling the virus. Although the numbers today are high, with 771 in hospital and 151 in ICU, they are dropping and that is positive. Today, the positivity rate is below 5%, I think for the first time since Christmas. That is very significant and welcome. On the vaccine roll-out, almost 300,000 people have been vaccinated. We are always compared to the UK and this is understandable as we are so close. However, it is important to note we have more people *per capita* vaccinated twice than the UK does, and a person is not fully covered until he or she has been vaccinated twice.

We are here today to debate student nurses. I acknowledge and welcome the Bill being brought forward by Senator Hoey. It is important that the work student nurses do at the moment is recognised. In fairness to the Senator, she has been very vocal on this issue since her election to the Seanad. It is worth noting however that in all the contributions it has not been acknowledged that student nurses have been paid while Deputy Donnelly has been Minister, up until the end of August. When we are campaigning for something it is important to acknowledge that there was recognition, at the start of the pandemic, that should nurses should be paid. Most people would acknowledge that what student nurses are doing at the moment is work and not placement. Admittedly, there is a technicality in that since September, clinical placements have been put back in position but anyone who has any experience of the health service at the moment would know that the work student nurses are doing is work and not placement. That needs to be recognised. A number of Senators, including Senator Sherlock, have touched on how there has been a big difference with placement in the last year and it needs to be recognised. If we are to pay student nurses, it needs to be backdated to when their status changed in August because it cannot be said that nurses were working from the start of the pandemic until August but were not working from August until now, during the second and third waves. The third wave has been the most difficult.

Anyone who watched the "RTÉ Investigates" programme from Tallaght hospital last week saw the incredible work that all nurses do. What touched me in that programme was that nurses obviously do their professional work but for the past year, they also seem to be replacing the role of family members for patients. Student nurses are the ones who seem to do that first and foremost. It is incredibly challenging to be a source of comfort to people through very difficult times, for example a mother going through labour without her partner, which is hugely difficult at the moment, especially if she is getting bad news. Mothers are without their partner unless they are in the delivery room. Nurses are also supporting people who are in intensive care units with Covid-19 and cannot meet any family members. The work that student nurses do in that regard needs to be recognised. Most people here seem to be in agreement that nurses, particularly student nurses, go above and beyond.

We also need to recognise that, as Senator Hoey touched on, all nurses, including student nurses, have not been vaccinated. I am aware of a couple of cases in Tipperary where public health nurses are administering vaccines to people over the age of 85 but are not vaccinated themselves. They were sent from Clonmel to Galway to get vaccinated while it was snowing, which was impossible. Those public health nurses are being told that their GPs cannot vaccinate them. Everyone is qualified to vaccinate the over-85s who are coming in but, for some reason, GPs cannot vaccinate their own public health nurses. That seems unfair. I have spoken to a number of public health nurses who are in that situation and feel let down by it. Could the Minister give some direction on that matter? Surely a GP should be able to give his or her public health nurse a vaccination and the nurses should not have to go searching themselves to try to get vaccinated because it is not viable for them to go to Galway or Dublin, or travel long distances to get the vaccination.

I thank the Minister for coming here. I welcome the Bill and wish it well.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Tá fáilte roimh an Aire. I welcome the Minister and thank him for all he, the Government and many other people are doing to keep us safe at this time. I know this is a very difficult time. It was Mary Harney who said that the worst day in government was better than the best day in opposition. I presume that still holds true in the Covid-19 era. It is a tough time for many people but there is, of course, some consolation, as Senator Ahearn just said, in the gradual dropping of the numbers. Sadly, the numbers are dropping slowly at the moment but at least they are going in the right direction.

I support the principle of this Bill. However, I want to add a word of caution about what I think the text of the Bill actually does. I completely support the idea that student nurses who were placed in hospitals during March, April and May of 2020 and again in the past eight weeks or so had a terrible baptism of fire which no student nurse before them was asked to face. Without a doubt, they picked up the huge amount of slack caused by the onslaught of cases of Covid-19 during those months. As a gesture of our thanks to them, they should certainly be entitled, and should have been entitled, to a generous gratuity of some description in recognition of their service to the sick at such a difficult time. As Senator Ahearn stated, they have also provided a service to the families of the sick. Having borrowed €14 billion to spend on all the consequences of Covid, it seems like the least that we could do. However, I would add a word of caution about the Bill. There are many people, across many sectors, who are in trainee positions for short periods, doing on-the-job training for no pay. That is considered to be a *quid pro quo* of sorts. In other words, the vocational training they receive is considered their pay, or a sort of benefit-in-kind. It is not cost-free for the employer since resources are used to train people, supervise them and so on. This is the case in hospitals and the stress on the system led to the cancellation of placements last month as hospitals could not provide more senior nursing staff to supervise people in training.

The Bill would designate all time worked by student nurses as working time for the purposes of the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997. Unless any other arrangements are made, they would be entitled to the same wages as healthcare assistants. Are we setting a precedent here that will be difficult to follow? Are there other sectors with a culture of unpaid placements, provided on the understanding that vocational training is given, where there might now be demands for pay? I support payments of some kind for student nurses but we need to be careful about enshrining new rights in law because of the possible knock-on effects. This may not be the way to go, although the intention is good.

I cannot understand the curious political detachment on the part of the Government regarding this issue. It is illustrated by the fact that, at the same time Ministers were resisting calls to pay even a pittance to students working for free in the health service, they were signing off on an €81,000 pay hike for the Secretary General of the Department of Health. The current Secretary General of another Department has effectively been installed in that position. How can that be justified? On what objective basis was such a huge pay hike agreed at this time? What does it say about the Government's priorities? Many people would think that €200,000 a year should be enough for any patriot.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank Senator Hoey and her party for once again being the voice of the working class in this country. Fair play to the Labour Party. It always puts the workers first. I also pay tribute to Phil Ní Sheaghdha and the executive committee of the INMO. Having been the president of a union myself, I can only imagine the pressure that has been on the executive of the INMO to take some sort of action to defend its members and its future members, namely, the students. They need our full support and backing. Fair play to them. I recognise what they are doing.

One thing has become clear to me during this pandemic, which is that the lowest paid in our society have been thrown under the bus to keep this country running. I am talking about the supermarket workers, the truck drivers, the Defence Forces, the trainee gardaí and the student nurses. I was in hospital for surgery in January and I can tell the Minister about my first-hand experience of the work done by those men and women, from the moment one enters the hospital, to protect patients. This is important for people who are non-Covid patients and who need to go into hospital today. The work the nurses do to keep patients safe as they pass through the system is unbelievable. Then one meets these young people. I ask the Minister to think of an 18- or 19-year-old student being expected to explain to somebody with severe dementia what is going on, being expected to play the part of a family member, being expected to comfort people when a death takes place and in some cases having to relay the news that a loved one has passed away. We are here talking about a Bill to pay them.

I commend Senator Hoey on what she has done but, ultimately, we all know that this Bill will have its second reading and that is all it will have. We are never going to see this Bill actually pass into law, despite all the nice words that are being said here. The Minister has it within his gift to do something and he should do it this evening. It is obscene that we are paying a man an additional €81,000 on top of a salary of approximately €200,000 when there are people who cannot afford to feed their families. Nurses cannot go home to their families for fear of bringing an infection with them and we are sitting here debating a Bill which should never have gotten this far because that to which it relates should have been done automatically. I do not share the fears of my colleague, Senator Mullen, about this creating a precedent that we will have to live with for the future. If one does the job, he or she must get paid for it.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Like others, I thank Senator Hoey for bringing this Bill forward and allowing us to debate this issue. I also thank the Minister for coming to the House. One of the bigger questions we need to ask is why student nurses ended up in our healthcare system, essentially having to do the work of nurses and midwives. As students, they should not be expected to do this work. The challenge has been that we have had an underfunded and under-resourced health system for quite some time. One of the things that was overlooked in the budget was that the Minister was able to secure an extra €4 billion for the health service, the largest increase in the health budget in the history of the State, which will allow us to transform our health system. I hope we will never see a situation again - obviously, none of us wants to

see a pandemic - in which student nurses and midwives have to step into the role of nursing staff and that we will have a sufficient number of clinical and front-line staff within our healthcare system. The Minister is to be congratulated on that because he addressed the underlying problem as to why student nurses had to step in and that deserves recognition.

I agree with the comments made by my colleague, Senator Ahearn, around the clinical placement issue and some of the challenges in that regard later in the year and that is something I hope the Minister will address. I was very struck by Senator Sherlock's definition of work, with which I certainly agree and which I am very clear about. If somebody works, then he or she should be paid for that work. In this context, during the course of the pandemic, student nurses and midwives worked. That was acknowledged in that many of them were directly employed as healthcare assistants but there were other instances where they were clearly engaged in work and it is arguable that it was not recognised.

The challenge, however, is the situation that will arise when we move beyond this pandemic, and we all hope that we will be out of it as soon as possible. Where is the line drawn between work and education? This is going to be a challenge for the legislation and it will need to be clarified.

During my student political days - Senator Hoey referred to her own - the big debate that was going on was the move from the vocational model of nursing education to this professional, academic, four-year degree model. It was a controversial decision at the time but was the right one. It means that we have probably the best model of nursing education in the world. It is something of which we should be very proud and the quality of our education is part of the reason our nurses are sought internationally. We should not go back to the vocational model.

On the point made on the exploitation of students, that has to be condemned in the strongest possible way. I hope students who felt that they had been exploited in any way, or put into situations in which they felt uncomfortable, reported that to the director of nursing and to the directors of the programmes in each of the universities where the nursing programmes are run. The exploitation of students is unacceptable and it should not have happened in any of the hospitals or in any of the universities in which there are students. I am quite certain the Minister would share that view.

It is very important we put on the record of this House our thanks to all of those student nurses and midwives for stepping up to the plate. They deserve to be rewarded and recognised for the work they have done. We need, however, to look at the longer term issue as to where the line falls between what is work and what is education and training and I am conscious of the issues raised by Senator Mullen.

In a broader context, I hope the fact there is such significant additional investment in the health service will mean far more employment opportunities for those student nurses and midwives when they graduate and, most importantly, a reduction in waiting lists and an improved quality of service for patients in the system. In addition, I hope that not only will we have the best education system for our student nurses but that we will have the best public health system in the world which will be able to serve all of our people. It is often said, somewhat unfairly given the Minister has a very difficult job, that just because he cannot do everything, in some way he is being mean and that he does not understand. I know the Minister personally to be someone of deep compassion, who is passionate about wanting to get the job done. Our challenge in this House is not only that we address this issue but also that we acknowledge the

additional investment and ensure that student nurses and midwives are never put into that challenging situation again.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I support Senator Hoey's motion to recognise the contribution of student nurses and midwives, who have been at the coalface over the last 12 months. It is important to note it is a key priority of Government to protect and support the continued education of all students, including student nurses and midwives. A key part of that education, in order to meet the standards and requirements of the regulator, is the completion of the supernumerary placements which place them on the front line in a learning capacity for up to 50% of the year. However, over the last year, student nurses have had to go above and beyond a learning capacity.

I raised this issue in November and I remember Senator Hoey was quite surprised that a Government Member spoke up on this. However, I feel that, in the meantime, the Government has reacted in a small way to this issue. The review by Professor Collins recommended a pandemic placement payment of €100 for each week spent on placement from last September, which was accepted by the Minister. However, I believe this payment should be backdated to the start of the pandemic in March. I also ask for an update on the talks with the unions in regard to other recommendations in the report.

It is important to acknowledge the other supports, such as the pandemic unemployment payment, SUSI and enhanced illness benefit, and also to note that other healthcare students are not paid before they qualify, be they medical students, physiotherapists or radiographers. Maybe it is time to start a conversation for all in the medical field. We want to keep them in their professions and in this country. It is important that we highlight their plight and support them in the future. We owe them a great debt of gratitude.

I acknowledge the work of the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, since his appointment, and the work of all of our health service staff on behalf of the citizens of this country. I support Senator Hoey and compliment her on the motion and all the work she has done on this in recent years.

Senator Seán Kyne: Fáiltím roimh an díospóireacht seo. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Seánadóir Hoey as ucht na hoibre atá déanta aici. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire, an Teachta Donnelly.

I am a member of the Joint Committee on Health, which heard recently from Phil Ní Sheaghda, general secretary of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, on the topic of the protection and support of front-line healthcare workers. We know the enormous work that nurses and midwives do year-round but particularly in the last year, which has been a very difficult one for so many sectors of society but particularly for front-line staff. We have to acknowledge that. We owe them more than a round of applause. We owe them our gratitude and additional supports, and I hope we can see to that being provided.

As others have said, the world faces a shortage of nurses and midwives and we, as a country, rely much on other countries to provide our nursing staff. This is a challenge we have to grasp. We have to make the profession more attractive so more people here will wish to study and stay in the sector once they graduate. The Irish registered nurse and midwife is a huge asset to the HSE, and we should acknowledge and be proud of the professionalism, the education and the practice that exists in this country. We have educational and clinical infrastructure for undergraduate nurses and midwives which is top class. It is why our nurses are so highly thought

of internationally and in such high demand abroad, and we have to acknowledge that as well.

I acknowledge the decision of the Government, of which I was a part, in March of last year to pay student nurses. This temporary hiring of nurses and midwifery students as healthcare assistants as part of the first Covid wave concluded on 31 August. Some of the commentary over recent months seems to ignore that, as if this debate started on 1 September, ignoring the previous Government decision as if it had not occurred. It was the right decision at that time and I still believe it is the right decision now, and certainly as we experience another wave.

I welcome the review into nursing and midwifery that is taking place. It is due to report with recommendations this year also. Obviously, that will generate its own debate on the future of this very important topic. It is important that we show that nursing is a valuable and worthy career. It is a caring profession in which Ireland has a proud track record. We can all relate to people we know who are in the nursing profession or we have family who work in the nursing profession. We can all understand, from cradle to grave, the valuable role that nurses play. We can all expect interaction with the nursing and the caring professions when they look after our own families as they get older and ourselves as we get older. It is a very important profession and cohort of people. We all understand and acknowledge that.

While the Minister is here, I wish to raise the matter of the emergency department in Galway. I have raised this issue with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, previously at the health committee and in a Seanad Commencement debate taken by the Minister's colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins. I understand there is a high-level meeting on 2 March with the CEO of Saolta University Health Care Group, Mr. Tony Canavan, and the HSE estates department, to try to progress the matter of the emergency department, which been debated *ad nauseam* for a number of years. Everybody accepts that the work is needed. Advance works have been done but we need to get to the next stage to ensure the Saolta University Health Care Group submits its planning application for that emergency department. I hope the Minister can assist in that.

I commend Senator Hoey and the Labour Party on this Bill. I hope the Minister will support it.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I ask the House for permission to share time with Senator Mark Wall, with four minutes and two minutes.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, to the House. I thank the Minister for coming in to personally take the Bill. I commend my colleague, Senator Annie Hoey, on her great and passionate commitment to bringing the Bill before us and to ensuring the work of student nurses is recognised in this tangible way. This very simple and straightforward Bill seeks to ensure adequate payment and remuneration for work being done by student nurses. As other colleagues across the House have said, all of us must acknowledge and recognise the immense work and sacrifice from our front-line healthcare workers and from student nurses, in particular, who have done such Trojan work throughout this pandemic and over the past months. They have been disadvantaged in a way we do not see any other cohort being disadvantaged. On the one hand they are students in training and on the other hand they are being asked to do very hard and dangerous work. I also commend the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation on providing us with such a clear briefing on this. The INMO has pointed out to us the level of disadvantage faced by student nurses, and that despite broad public and political

support for their case, which is evidenced today in this House, student nurses' and midwives' work still goes unpaid from first year to third year, with lower levels of pay for fourth-year interns since January 2021 than in March 2020. The INMO points out that first-year to third-year students also lack the protection of a contract of employment, so they are disadvantaged in a number of ways.

I must briefly express to the Minister the words of nurses themselves who have made known to me their own experience and perspectives on this debate. They say that the argument for not paying first-year to third-year student nurses is that placement is a learning experience to engage in observation and to be taught by a preceptor. Their experience is that because there is not enough staff they are doing the work of healthcare assistants full time without sufficient teaching because the "preceptors are far too busy with their own work to teach us". They say they end up doing the work of a healthcare assistant, and they often tend to take on this work for their entire shift with little tutoring and no pay. This is very bad for morale. I am told that it is common practice to pull students from a ward to another ward away from their preceptor and away from any reasonable teaching opportunity. A rule is in place against pulling a student nurse to another ward without his or her preceptor in hospitals, but given the staffing crisis it has simply not been practical to enforce this. Student nurses regularly spend entire shifts carrying out the sort of monitoring work, as others have described so eloquently, where they must observe a delirious or confused patient or someone who is at severe risk, with a whole day of placement missed on each occasion for the student nurse. They say that friends who are training with the National Health Service are not used as bodies as they are, to use their own words. Clearly this has an immense effect on the health and finances of student nurses, many of whom need to take on other work to sustain themselves and many of whom have to pay rent because they are so afraid of transmitting the virus to a vulnerable family member that they cannot live at home even where this would otherwise be practical. In addition, they have to keep on top of college work and study. I know of nurses who are struggling with sleep and are worrying about patients, their own health and the risk they pose to their families and friends. As others have eloquently put it, we need to move on this. We need to recognise the work that student nurses are doing. I urge colleagues to support this Bill and I hope the Government will do so as well. I will now hand over to my colleague, Senator Wall.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I apologise to Senator Wall but it seems that, by order of the House rather than my doing, it was necessary to submit names in advance.

Senator Ivana Bacik: We did. Senator Sherlock who spoke previously did so.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We will take it now so. The Senators did submit Senator Wall's name.

Senator Ivana Bacik: Yes, we submitted it.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The officials say that it was not received.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I am afraid that I will not get to come in.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: It is not about that. Senator Wall may continue anyway.

Senator Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister to the House. I thank my friend and colleague, Senator Hoey, for introducing this Bill. It was the Leader who christened Senator Hoey the Senator for students. It is a very appropriate title given the continuing work she does on

behalf of all students. As somebody whose wife is a nurse and midwife and whose sister is a nurse, I am acutely aware of what is involved in this great profession. The dedication of those who choose nursing and midwifery as a career can never, and should never, be questioned. The issue is now how we, as a State, view the work currently being carried out by our student nurses and midwives.

The Government has conceded that it should pay student nurses and midwives but the pandemic placement grant of €100 per week is nothing short of an insult in light of what these students are doing on behalf of the State, day in and day out, at this time. We have now reached the unwelcome milestone of more than 4,000 deaths from this disease in this country. Unfortunately, many families have not been able to say goodbye to their loved ones as they passed away from this dreadful disease in our hospitals. Many of the students to whom I spoke were there during those final hours, holding the hands of those same loved ones. These same students have filled in for and replaced their senior colleagues whenever requested without questioning why. Using the excuse that these students are in an educational setting while doing this work is totally unacceptable. Not paying them for this type of work is nothing short of exploitation and the Government continues to stand over it while accepting that these students should be paid.

We all want to build a health system that is fit for purpose. Some of us would like to build a public health system. Whatever one's view is, one thing is for certain; we need students to qualify as nurses and midwives. It is time that we recognise the tremendous effort of all of these students and time that they were paid for the work they are undoubtedly doing. Our front-line workers have performed heroically over this last year, doing what they do every other day but now dressed in full-length personal protection equipment to protect our loved ones, our families and our neighbours who have succumbed to this virus. They do this because it is their job, the profession they have chosen and the work in which they all have so much pride. The experience our student nurses and midwives are accumulating at this time will surely stand to them as they begin and continue in their great profession. We should be ensuring that they stay in this profession and that they will become part of a public healthcare system of which we can all be proud. The time for applause is over. It is beyond time to pay our student nurses and midwives.

Senator Lynn Boylan: The Senator could have kept talking. I welcome the Minister and commend Senator Hoey on her work in respect of this issue. I welcome the Bill being brought forward by the Labour Party. We have heard today that the exploitation of our student nurses and midwives is absolutely scandalous. They are filling vital roles in a healthcare system that has been deprived of resources and chronically understaffed for years. During the pandemic, more than 4,000 students have been working on the front line. The work they are undertaking is incredibly dangerous. It is no exaggeration to say that they are literally risking their lives to protect every one of us. Not only are they not paid to do so, but they are asked to pay €3,000 to €7,500 for the privilege. It is an insult and it comes as no surprise that 71% of student nurses are considering leaving the country. A close friend of mine whose daughter is a student nurse was distraught during the first wave as she watched her daughter come home exhausted every evening, crying her eyes out at the despair she was witnessing in the hospitals. Last month, the Dáil passed a Sinn Féin motion calling on the Government to publish the Collins report on pandemic pay for student nurses and midwives. We know that the scale of the pressure on the health service has utterly changed since the beginning of the year and the fact that there has been no movement on this matter is shocking. Students are constantly met with a wall of delays and excuses.

As others have stated, we should judge a person by his or her actions over his or her words.

From the Government's actions in recent months, it is very clear where its priorities lie. The fact that the Government has not acted to pay student nurses but has acted to increase the pay of Members of the Oireachtas and to pay obscene salary increases to Ministers, as well as to the senior management of the Department, has not gone unnoticed by the public. It tells people everything they need to know about what the Government really thinks of working people.

This is an issue that should not divide us. It is an issue on which this House should be united. We have heard from Members on all sides about the wonderful work student nurses and midwives are doing and that of course they should be paid but as I stated, actions speak louder than words. We need to do what is right. The Minister must right the wrong here and pay student nurses and midwives reasonable and fair rates of pay and allowances.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I very much welcome the opportunity to address the Seanad on the Private Members' Bill, and the interest of colleagues in the health service and the nursing and midwifery professions. I thank the Labour Party Senators for tabling the Bill which initiated this evening's debate. I recognise in particular the ongoing, important work of Senator Hoey and her colleagues on issues pertaining to students.

Like many Members of the House, I take the opportunity to acknowledge the real commitment of all nursing and midwifery students to healthcare and to their education. I also thank all nurses and midwives and all healthcare workers for their dedication and commitment as we continue to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. As we all know, it has been a very tough year right across the country. It has been a very tough year in particular for all those in healthcare, be they students or qualified staff - doctors, nurses, hospital porters, cleaners, receptionists or managers. Like many colleagues here, I have spoken directly with a lot of healthcare workers. What they have experienced is really tough. They are working long hours. They have been under huge pressure. They have seen awful situations within the hospitals. The recent "Prime Time Investigates" report from Tallaght University Hospital really brought home both the level of pressure that our healthcare workers have been under and the extraordinary commitment they have and just how fortunate we all are to have them. They continue to step up week after week to make sure the healthcare system in this country continues.

Student nurses and midwives are in educational placements and while they are on the supernumerary clinical placements, they are in addition to the rostered staff. That has been agreed between the colleges and the HSE. The education is carried out under supervision on the front line in accordance with the relevant EU directive, as part of a team across a wide variety of care settings. The supervision is provided by qualified, experienced nurses and midwives.

If they wish to do so, students may undertake paid work in healthcare settings while adhering to the public health advice, while maintaining their nursing and midwifery programme, which many do. Students obtain a high level of competency over the training programme and by the internship year this is at a level where they can work under what is called distant supervision. Up until then, they are building that competency and in line with education programmes, paid work is not counted towards regulated clinical learning hours and experience. That is an important part of this issue. In order to qualify, very specific hours are required in terms of learning and competencies. It is highly structured. According to the directives laid down at European level, paid hours do not count toward that.

I note that the Bill refers to the setting of specific pay levels by the HSE for particular work; in this case, for healthcare assistants. Although I understand the desire to prescribe such pay in

the Bill, it is important to note that pay determination is a matter for the HSE under section 22 of the Health Act. It is not a political act; it is a matter for the HSE under the 2004 Act. Such determination is given effect with the approval of the Minister for Health and the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. In that context, it is not a matter for the Oireachtas to deal with a specific pay issue such as this other than by way of amending legislation to the Health Act to determine pay.

That said, as I stated earlier, the Government is not opposing the Bill as it generally refers to pay for work. The Government fully supports the paid work internship programme, for example, that is in place for fourth year student nurses and midwives. It also fully supports the continued protection of the nursery and midwifery supernumerary clinical placements programme. Changing the supernumerary status of those placements, which is essentially what we are debating, to that of an employee would remove the educational protections that are so important to the learning experience. Those protections mean the students are unencumbered by an employment contract. In other words, what they are there to do is to learn, which is the most important thing.

That is not to dismiss what has been a very difficult year in which students and, indeed, all those involved the healthcare system, have stepped up. As colleagues will be aware, nursing and midwifery has been a graduate profession in Ireland since 2004. Research has demonstrated that positive patient outcomes, including lower mortality rates and fewer medication errors, are linked to having a nursing and midwifery workforce that is educated to degree level. It is a very important component of the healthcare system for nurses and midwives themselves, but also very much for patients. It is important to focus on the benefits of the undergraduate nursing and midwifery programmes, which, as colleagues noted, are second to none. As the chief nurse told me one evening when we were discussing the details of these placements, the degree training in nursing and midwifery in this country is the envy of the professions globally. We are recognised as having one of the best educational programmes anywhere in the world for nurses and midwives. It is one of the reasons they are so highly sought after when they graduate. They are actively pursued by other countries because they are so well trained. The reason they are well trained is partly down to the hard work they put in during the programme, but it also stems from the four-year programme which was modelled on medical doctor training when it was introduced in 2004. The final year internship programme is very unusual. It is a valuable part of the programme.

We may agree or disagree on various matters, but I assure colleagues that I spent a lot of time on this issue in recent months. I spent a lot of time with the chief nurse and departmental officials. I spent time listening to senior nurses and the higher education institutes. Each of those conversations started and ended with a passion from those people for education for the students. We can debate issues around pay for work and so forth, but I can tell the House with absolute certainty that I am confident that among the people whom we charge to make sure these students get the best education possible within the HSE - the preceptors, the nursing supervisors, the qualified senior nurses who work with the students, the professors, assistant professors and other staff in the colleges and higher education institutes, the officials in the Department of Health, the chief nurse and the NMBI team - there is an overwhelming commitment to ensure the students are safe, cared for and listened to and that they get the best possible education to make them the best nurses and midwives they can be. It is important to reflect that, although we can obviously disagree on many of the issues raised today. I have seen that commitment at the core of everything in my interactions since becoming the Minister for Health.

Student nurses and midwives undertake an honours degree level programme over four years. Unlike in the UK and in other international degree programmes, our graduate programme includes a contractual internship with a salary for the final 36 weeks. The programme supports the optimal learning environment, where students actively take part in patient care and learn through supervision. Over the four years of the programme, the payment to the students is approximately €17,400. Additional expenses can also be claimed in some cases for travel and accommodation.

I am sure that every Member of this House will agree that our nurses and midwives are internationally sought after. As some colleagues said, we want to recruit more and we have put significant investment in place for the coming year both to scale up the nursing and midwifery workforces and, critically, to do so according to the agreed safe staffing levels. That is really important. We need the HSE and public healthcare in Ireland to be the place where our graduates want to work. That is important. The graduate programme has created exciting career opportunities. It has extended practice and has allowed for advanced practice routes, which were not possible previously and which are being seized upon by our qualified workforce.

There are many opportunities for graduate nurses and midwives by way of further education, for example. The policy for the development of a graduate to advanced nursing and midwifery practice provides a framework for graduates to draw upon their undergraduate programme. Additional funding of €2.2 million has been recently provided for the advanced nurse practitioner and advanced midwife practitioner roles. The numbers employed in these grades continue to increase, which is important. Today's graduate nursing and midwifery students can apply for the enhanced nurse midwife role after one year and 16 weeks of suitable experience, and that role has a starting salary of a little over €37,000. There are also various allowances and pay premiums in certain roles.

The expert review on nursing and midwifery is also a really exciting development. It is expected to report to me with recommendations in the coming months and it is going to be an important milestone in the evolution of the professions in Ireland. It is exciting work. This work on the future of nursing and midwifery is being undertaken in the context of significant planned reform within our health service. Student placements in our hospitals are a vital part of the clinical learning programmes. Clinical placements make up 50% of those programmes. As students rather than employees, supernumerary clinical student placements ensure that learning takes place on the front line, while being supervised. This enables students to develop the practical knowledge, clinical skills and professional behaviours required for competence to qualify and be eligible to join the professional register, which of course is what we all want them to be able to do.

The Government wants to protect the status of participants in these programmes as students and to protect the graduate programme, which has so many benefits. The supernumerary clinical placements afford students the opportunity to learn in the optimal clinical learning environment. That is the view of the Higher Education Authority, the preceptors, the directors of nursing and of Professor Collins. We will also have another review of those placements later.

The placements were disrupted several times during Covid-19, as colleagues have stated. In April 2020, all clinical placements were cancelled nationally to free up for full-time patient care the qualified nurses and midwives who would normally have been supervising students during their placements. An impression may have been given that the nurses, while on placement, were then simply paid as healthcare assistants and that there was a simple transition. Clarifica-

tion of this point is important. That is not what happened.

All student placements were cancelled. The hospitals then offered HCA roles, essentially, and approximately one in three students applied for those. The student places did not transition into HCA roles at all; they stopped. Much work was then done to make sure that learning time was made up. As I said earlier, the time in paid employment cannot and does not count towards their qualifications.

Significant recruitment across the system last year of more than 6,000 staff, which included approximately 1,700 nurses and midwives, enabled the placements to resume for this academic year, which obviously was very important. Then, of course, we had the third wave, of which Senators are aware. The HSE contacted the Department and asked again that the student placements be suspended for first, second and third years. Again, that was done because it freed up several hundred qualified nurses, and in some cases, senior nurses who would normally be supervising the students, to go where the HSE needed them for full-time patient care. That lasted approximately three weeks. As the pressure has eased somewhat, although they are obviously still under huge pressure, the HSE was able to put the placement infrastructure back in place. A phased return of those placements is now happening.

I want to acknowledge the efforts to maintain placements. There is, however, no doubt that the education of healthcare students during a pandemic is challenging, as evidenced today by the very powerful, personal and important testimonies that have been read out by many Senators. We need to listen to the students very carefully. It has been a tough year. Neither I nor anybody else is going to try to dismiss that. It has been tough and we need to recognise this.

I will clarify that the student nurses were vaccinated. I double-checked that they were vaccinated as part of cohort 2. If the Senator, or indeed, any colleagues have examples where that has not happened, they should feel free to contact me directly and I will raise it with the HSE immediately because they are most definitely included in cohort 2.

To further assist student nurses and midwives on clinical placements, I appointed Professor Tom Collins to carry out an independent review of the clinical placement allowance specifically during Covid-19, a more stressful time of which we are all aware. Professor Collins reported back to me on 31 December and made several recommendations. The one of focus is his recommendation to implement a pandemic placement grant, which is the non-taxable €100 per week for each supernumerary placement week during the pandemic. He provided an option for me to backdate that to the start of September. Therefore, the recommendation is that the 12 weeks of placement essentially would be subject to a non-taxable payment of €1,200. I would very much like to pay this and implement Professor Collins's recommendation. We have had good conversations with the representative bodies and will continue to have those. If we can get to a point where there is agreement with Professor Collins's report as a balanced response to the placements during Covid-19, we can implement his recommendations straight away.

I have also asked for a long-term review of the placements and allowances to be carried out. I believe this is very important. This will go some way to addressing some of the issues that have been raised here by colleagues around students being able to afford to be students. My view is that financial barriers should never prevent someone from being a student. We are all aware that they do at times. There is no question about it. Graduate training for student nurses and midwives should not be down to, for example, how much family income might be

available.

That is one of the points that is going to be examined in the long-term review. The work has commenced and I have asked that I receive a report in June. That will give us some time to work with the students themselves, the representative bodies, the educators and all the stakeholders to determine whether we can reach agreement and implement the plan from the start of the academic year this coming September.

I do not underestimate the difficulties that student nurses and midwives have had over the past year. Without question, it continues to be a difficult time. The Department of Health and I, in conjunction with the HSE, higher education institutes, the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, our clinical partners and representative organisations, will continue to focus on supporting our students, keeping them safe and ensuring they have the best possible education that they can have.

Senator Annie Hoey: I thank everyone for their contributions. I thank the Minister for being here. I have recovered a little from my nervous jog up the stairs and I am a little calmer now that we are on the other side of my first go at this.

It seems that all in the room are in agreement that student nurses and midwives should be paid while they are working. It is clear from the testimonies of the students I read into the record today that student nurses are working from their first year all the way up to their final year. We are having a slight dispute over this and there are technicalities associated with what is defined as work, but the student nurses and midwives are working. There is no question about that.

Comments made by some people, although not made here today, to the effect that what student nurses are doing is not real work have been deeply hurtful, unfounded and really uncalled for. I have to hand the comment of a nurse who said:

To see the Government tell us we are not doing real work is a huge kick in the teeth. I have never been so hurt and upset by a comment they have no place making. I truly wish they could spend a day in my shoes and see what they have to say for themselves then.

The key point is that none of us in this room has spent a day in nurses' shoes. Perhaps some have but I am just unaware of their background. We are not on the front line and we are not nurses. I hope the testimonies give an insight into the reality students are facing on the ground.

Let me address some of the issues that have been raised. Regarding work, I alluded to the fact that student nurses and midwives have actually been working for a period longer than that of the pandemic and will continue to work after the pandemic is over, whatever that looks like. Therefore, while we have a need to deal with the additional workload undertaken over the past 12 months, I am still very firm in my belief that we need to recognise that student nurses and midwives from first year onwards have been working and will continue to do so. Therefore, I still believe this legislation is appropriate.

I want to respond to the statement that paying those who are working or training while students might set a precedent. I assume that it will strike no one as a surprise that as a former head of a union and student activist, I do indeed believe all people should be paid for work and that the line between work and training is thin, to say the least. A journalist asked me whether I believe everyone who is working while training should be paid and I said they should. There

was a deathly silence. I will continue to be very firm in my belief. For example, I support SIPTU's call for radiographers to be paid and other calls coming up the line to pay students who are working. We should not build the public sector on the back of unpaid labour.

It was stated that we need to keep nurses and midwives here and that we have a shortage. It is common sense, therefore, that we should be treating our student nurses and midwives better. We should be paying them and treating them with respect and valuing the contribution they make from first year up. To treat people poorly at the start of their careers simply gives them an incentive to leave as soon as they can and go somewhere they will be paid well, respected and have a good quality of life. It is, therefore, a bad business decision not to pay student nurses and midwives. The evidence exists to back this up. We have high rates of emigration and a nursing shortage. We have overseas campaigns to recruit nurses from abroad. Even from a basic business perspective, we have got to get this right because student nurses, whether we agree with them or not, want to be paid and feel the need to be paid. Since they are not being paid, they are making plans to leave this country.

In 2014, when I was the president of the Union of Students in Ireland, we carried out a survey of student nurses and learned that 93% of them said they were considering emigrating. That number is bananas. If we were to propose in a business model to treat the student nurses as we are treating them, and do so in the knowledge that about 93% would think about leaving at the other side, we would not get away with it. We need to be very clear about that. We have the best education system in the world but are we getting the benefit of having such a system if these student nurses and midwives are emigrating?

There is no question about the commitment to teaching and learning. The Minister has agreed to the payment of a weekly stipend of €100, so it seems that we may be splitting hairs over what we call it. That may be for legal or technical reasons. I do not know because I am still relatively new to this. We need to find a way forward and there needs to be financial remuneration for the work that those involved are doing. That is probably the simplest way to look at it. They are doing work and there needs to be some sort of financial remuneration for them. I am happy to sit down with the Minister in order to figure out a way to facilitate the introduction of that remuneration, whether through this legislation or by some other means.

Telling students that we are refusing to pay them in order to protect their learning will not cut the mustard with the student nurses or midwives. Where there is a will there is a way. The Minister is a clever man so I am sure he can figure out a solution. Between now and this Bill being sent into the ether, I implore him to sit down with the trade unions and find a way forward. I thank all the student nurses and midwives who are helping to hold our system together and, in particular, I thank those who have been taking good care of a special friend of mine in Beaumont Hospital for the past week.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We wish Senator Hoey's friend a speedy recovery. I thank the Minister and all my colleagues for their successful participation.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Annie Hoey: Next Tuesday.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Seanad Éireann

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 23 February 2021.

The Seanad adjourned at 5.12 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Monday, 22 February 2021.