



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 30 Meán Fómhair 2021

Thursday, 30 September 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 have received notice from Senator Maria Byrne that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, she proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on his proposals to provide post-pandemic air route supports to Shannon Airport.

I have also received notice from Senator Aisling Dolan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the waiting times to access family home care hours in the community healthcare west region.

I have also received notice from Senators Niall Ó Donnghaile and Emer Currie for the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the creation of a portal to enable Irish citizens vaccinated in Northern Ireland and outside the EU to obtain the EU digital Covid certificate.

I have also received notice from Senator Eugene Murphy of the following matter:

The need for the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works to make a statement on the implications of the recent High Court order to temporarily halt the flood relief works to Lough Funshinagh, County Roscommon.

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

The need for the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to provide an update on the implementation of the Cassells report on higher education funding.

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

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The need for the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to make a statement on the implementation of the national broadband plan specifically in relation to the progress on the connectivity across Country Tipperary.

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

The need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the development of the greenway and blueways in County Louth.

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

The need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the N4 extension from Mullingar to Roosky, County Roscommon.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Maria Byrne, Dolan, and Ó Donnghaile and Currie, who will be sharing time, and they will be taken now. Senator Murphy has withdrawn his Commencement matter, which I had originally selected. The other Senators may give notice on another day on the matters which they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Airport Policy

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler for coming into the House and wish her a belated happy birthday. I call on Senator Maria Byrne, who has four minutes.

Senator Maria Byrne: I welcome the Minister of State and join in wishing her a happy birthday. I wish to raise the issue of Shannon Airport, which has been through a very turbulent time in regard to Aer Lingus and a number of routes being closed down. That said, there have been many announcements by Ryanair regarding many holiday destinations. Many businesses in the Shannon area, however, that is, in Limerick and in the mid-west region are dependent on routes out of Shannon Airport. While I welcome that there is now connectivity with Heathrow and the announcement on the American side of things that issues around border control will open up shortly and that routes will be back, perhaps in November, it is really important that the Government takes a thorough look at Shannon Airport. There has been major investment in regard to businesses expanding and businesses locating in the mid-west region and that is down to connectivity with our friends in the US and with Europe. As for Heathrow, we have had Brexit and we also need to look at connectivity in terms of a European hub. This is very important for businesses in the mid-west because prior to the pandemic, many businesses stated when they opened up or announced that they were locating in the mid-west, that it was down to education as well. We have three third level education institutions in the mid-west and they have helped, along with connectivity.

Many aviation companies have opened in Limerick and around the Shannon area. There is

everything from aircraft leasing to the education and training board putting on a skills training course for aircraft maintenance. While Shannon Airport is separate, under the remit of Dublin Airport, the Government needs to give a boost to Shannon and the mid-west. I welcome the fact that Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Naughton, visited Shannon Airport recently and we saw an investment of over €6 million for a new baggage carrier. There will be many benefits arising from that and it will shorten the length of time people must wait. As we have a very long runway in Shannon, there are many things going for Shannon Airport but we need Government support and investment.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Cathaoirleach for his wishes. The Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, sends her apologies, as she is not able to be here this morning. The Senator hit the nail on the head when she said Shannon Airport has come through “turbulent times”. No two words could better sum up what we have come through in the past 18 months. Ireland is particularly dependent on air connectivity, both socially and economically. Aviation plays a crucial role in our economy as a driving force for tourism and business, including foreign direct investment. Civil aviation is emerging from by far the most challenging crisis it has ever faced, with many analysts predicting that it will take several years to return to 2019 levels of activity. Eurocontrol data indicates that overall aircraft movements within its pan-European network are currently holding at around 70% of 2019 levels. However, recovery in Ireland is slower, with aircraft movements at approximately 50% of 2019 levels. The Government has a comprehensive suite of measures in place to support businesses in addressing the impact of Covid-19, including those in the aviation sector. It is estimated that, through several available supports, Irish airlines and airports have received more than €300 million.

In addition to the Government’s economy-wide support measures, in November 2020 an €80 million funding package for Irish aviation was announced. This package included the regional airports programme, which provided more than €21 million to our regional airports for 2021 and which supports the operation of our public service obligation air services. The Covid-19 regional State airports programme for 2021 provided €32 million to Cork Airport and Shannon Airport. Under EU state aid rules, the European Commission approved a €26 million Covid supplementary supports scheme to compensate airport operators for a portion of the damage caused by Covid-19 and the travel restrictions imposed by Ireland to limit its spread.

These supports notwithstanding, our airlines and other aviation stakeholders have had to make several difficult decisions to best ensure their long-term commercial viability. These decisions have focused on areas such as redundancies, laying off staff and the closure of operational bases, all in response to the significant reduction in their operations. Industry has also introduced shorter working schemes, which have reduced both the working hours and pay received by their staff. Most operators have also raised new funding, where possible, either through increased borrowings or the issue of new capital.

Non-essential international travel was permitted to resume from 19 July this year. The progress made with our national vaccination programme, the introduction of the EU digital Covid certificate and the adoption of an emergency brake mechanism to allow for an appropriate response to the potential emergence of any Covid-19 variants that present new or increased risk to public health means that international travel can operate safely. It is hoped that the recent announcements of the resumption of international travel between the US and Europe for vaccinated travellers in November and the discontinuation of our mandatory hotel quarantine system for those arriving from designated states will accelerate the restoration of extra-European

air services and the recovery in the transatlantic market, which is of particular importance for Ireland.

I assure the Senator that Shannon Airport is a key element in our regional development plans. Shannon Group has availed of the economy-wide supports provided by Government as well as having received funding under our bespoke aviation support schemes. In total, the Government has allocated almost €33 million in support to Shannon Group since the crisis began and this will assist in positioning it for recovery. Prior to this, Shannon Airport, like all of our State airports, was self-funding.

Of the €26 million provided for under our EU-approved state aid scheme to compensate airport operators for a portion of the Covid-19 related damage to business between April and June 2020, our State airports were provided with €20 million in funding. Funding was allocated on a *pro rata* basis, with 2019 passenger figures used to determine the appropriate apportionment of funds. Shannon Airport received just under €1 million which will afford it greater flexibility in its ability to offer route incentives, in consultation with airlines.

The economic recovery plan 2021 launched with the goal of achieving rapid job creation and economic growth after the Covid-19 pandemic. This plan set out new measures and provided for the continuation of business supports. Importantly, this plan also recognised the potential need for additional supports for aviation. Officials in the Department of Transport are considering the possible need and options for further targeted supports for aviation with a view to aiding in the restoration of lost air connectivity and competitiveness.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for her response. Yesterday, I welcomed in the House the appointment of Pádraig Ó Céidigh as the new chair of the board. I certainly believe that his experience of aviation and business will be a big asset. Shannon Airport has suffered a lot more than the other airports. With regard to Aer Lingus, it was the staff who suffered. Jobs were cut, including the jobs of many people with mortgages. Shannon Airport needs extra attention because it has been hit worst. The jobs lost there are not going to be replaced whereas the jobs of those working in all of the other airports were suspended on a temporary basis while the airports were closed and have since been reinstated. Shannon Airport needs extra attention if it is to thrive and be the driver in the mid-west region. As the Minister of State said, the airport is key to economic development. I would appreciate it if she could take that message back to the Minister.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Government is committed to supporting our aviation sector. As the Senator will be well aware, the operation of air services is primarily a commercial decision for the air operators. In this regard, Ryanair's announcement of 18 routes to operate from Shannon this winter season is very welcome - I know the Senator has welcomed this already - as is the return to Shannon Airport of Aer Lingus operations on the London Heathrow route while Cork Airport is closed. The announced return of both American Airlines and United Airlines is a positive development, particularly as transatlantic connectivity is key to many commercial activities in the south-west region while also serving as a boon to our tourism and hospitality sector.

The Government and the Minister will continue to monitor and evaluate the performance of the aviation sector and the need for further targeted support schemes with a view to ensuring continued recovery and restoration.

I also welcome the appointment of the former Senator, Pádraig Ó Céidigh, to his new role. His experience will be very helpful and he will bring a focus to the regional airports.

Home Care Packages

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Health with responsibility for mental health and older people, Deputy Butler, to the Seanad. Families are applying to the HSE's home care hours scheme and receiving approval, which is great, but no help or home care is forthcoming. There are delays and backlogs and the shortage of staff is having an impact. I request an update from the Department of Health on waiting times for people who have been approved for family home care hours by the HSE in the community healthcare west area, which comprises counties Galway, Roscommon and Mayo. Older people and those with disabilities in rural areas are urgently waiting for help.

The home support scheme is for people over the age of 65 and for anybody with a disability or early onset dementia. The Minister of State has done a great deal of work in this area. People usually avail of the scheme after a hip operation or any stay in a hospital. It helps them settle back into their homes. The challenge is that we have very few step-down facilities. In rural regions, particularly in Roscommon and east Galway, the wide geographic areas result in higher mileage costs for healthcare assistants. We see younger members of the family moving away from home, which makes it more difficult. There was also an increase of 20% in the number of people aged over 65 in the most recent census. Our area of Roscommon and east Galway is particularly affected as we have an older age cohort.

Frailty is also a serious issue, as the Minister of State will be aware. After their first fall, many older people suddenly lose the confidence to walk around by themselves with walking or mobility aids. Our older loved ones are unable to handle a bath, a shower, dressing or shaving and need home help.

Under the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future, there are commitments to enable older people to live in their own homes with dignity and independence. Staff within the community healthcare organisation, CHO, 2 area, or the community healthcare west area, are dealing with very significant backlogs and are doing their best to meet demand. I am aware of the challenges in recruiting to the HSE. We need to increase the use of ehealth assistive technologies.

Our social services in Ballinasloe are going to be opening up, but slowly. This has also had a great impact on home care services. The HSE has the option to engage approved third party providers of home care, that is, consumer directed home support, CDHS. How well is this working? Do private providers have the staff to take these referrals from the HSE? We need to look at training. The Minister of State brought up the level of the minimum wage and the comparisons between the HSE and the private sector.

I am aware of the four sites for the new home support pilot the Minister of State has announced and that she is planning to provide for an additional 230,000 hours in CHO 2, that is, Galway, Roscommon and Mayo. This is to look at Tuam, Athenry and Loughrea. In last year's budget, 5 million additional home care hours were provided for 2021. That followed on from the 19 million hours provided for 2020 to alleviate community waiting lists for home care and to support people in avoiding hospital. I have a number of questions for the Department of

Health. When will more pilot schemes come on stream, particularly for Ballinasloe and the rest of the CHO 2 area? Ballinasloe has a catchment of nearly 14,000, taking into account both the rural zone and the urban area. What are the figures? What are the waiting lists? How many third-party providers are being used by the HSE to support the roll-out of the programme? What is the status of the new home support office, which I realise was to be opened only very recently, in August? There are 130 posts under the interRAI system. What are the numbers in this regard? Could I have a timeline for the new statutory home care scheme? I am aware of the Minister of State's commitment to home care support. She was a spokesperson on health previously and would have known this area extremely well.

We need access to resources in rural areas, wide geographical areas. There are challenges in this regard because there is a wider area to cover. For healthcare assistants, we are talking about mileage costs. We are talking about increased costs for private providers. Older people are living alone in isolated areas. When HSE home care hours are approved, they are urgently required. We need to make sure we are supporting people to live with dignity and independence in their own homes.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank Senator Dolan for raising this important issue. It is a key priority of the Government and of mine to enable more people to engage with services that allow them to remain independent and live in their own homes with dignity and independence for as long as possible. To advance this, the Government is committed to establishing a new statutory scheme on the financing and regulation of home support.

As the Senator quite rightly said, in July I announced the selection of four sites to test a reformed model of service delivery, through the delivery of 230,000 hours of home support. This pilot will underpin the development of the statutory scheme for home support services and will be fully operational by 1 November. As the Senator quite rightly said, Tuam, Athenry and Loughrea were selected for the pilot in the CHO 2 area.

A national home support office will be established before the end of this year to support the testing of the reformed model of service delivery. In addition, approximately 130 posts have been funded for the national roll-out of the interRAI Ireland system, which the home support pilot will test as the standard assessment tool for care needs. Recruitment of these posts will occur in quarter 4 of this year. In parallel, work is ongoing in the Department to make progress on other aspects of the scheme, including the development of a regulatory framework and the examination of options for the financing model. The ESRI is doing some work on that for us.

While this new home support scheme is under development, the Government is prioritising improving access to home support services for older people. The largest ever investment was made for home support hours for older people in budget 2021. My budget this year for home care supports is €666 million, a phenomenal amount. There has been an allocation of an additional €150 million this year. The national service plan sets a target to provide 24 million hours of home support. This is an ambitious target, the objective being to increase provision by 5 million hours in one year, or to exceed the 2020 target by more than 25%.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented challenges across our health services, the greatest being in older persons services. While there have been challenges in the delivery of home support hours, particularly during the third wave of the pandemic, significant progress has also been made.

Provisional information, which may be subject to change, indicates that at the end of August 2021, over 13.2 million home support hours had been provided to 53,905 people. This is about 2 million more hours than in the same period last year. Approximately 478 people were waiting for funding approval, representing an 88% reduction by comparison with the same period in 2020. As a result, the preliminary figures indicate to me that the extra hours have resulted in 1,200 people not having to enter nursing home care this year. That is a great achievement.

The consumer-directed home support approach facilitates funded clients to deal directly with the HSE approved providers of their choice and to arrange days and times of service delivery. This is available in all CHOs across the country. However, based on a recent evaluation undertaken by the office of the assistant national director responsible for older people, it has been found that the uptake of this approach nationally has been minimal since its launch in 2018.

To answer the Senator's questions, provisional data from the HSE indicate only one person was waiting for funding approval in CHO 2 at the end of August 2021. However, 651 are waiting on carers – 212 in Galway, 325 in Mayo and 114 in Roscommon. The challenges we have are not financial; they concern securing the staff. There are only 1,400 people waiting for funding. By the end of next month, there will be only 500, but the challenge is to recruit the staff. I will touch on that in addressing supplementary questions.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I thank the Minister of State for her response but I am shocked by it. I understand that funding has been provided and that the Government and programme for Government have indicated there is to be support for home care hours but there are still challenges that we have to rectify. No one else is going to rectify the recruitment problems within the HSE, or within the CHOs. We have to do this. We have to consider the number of third-party providers of consumer-directed home support. How many of them are being used to support the CHOs in delivering what is required? The staff within the CHOs are struggling and crying out for help trying to deal with this.

There are 651 people waiting on carers, including 212 in Galway, 325 in Mayo and 114 in Roscommon. These individuals all have families that are struggling and looking for help urgently. Our hospitals are not able to accommodate the individuals. We saw the waiting lists. We noted the issues in University Hospital Galway yesterday. In Portiuncula hospital, and probably in Roscommon town, the relevant figure is over 60. There is nowhere for the patients to go. Some are living longer, which is great. Life expectancy is increasing, which is wonderful, but we are still not able to support people living in their own homes. This is all part of Sláintecare. The affected people have suffered over the past 18 months.

I am aware that the Minister of State is doing her best but we have to do more. I would be interested in comparing my CHO area to others. Is it the same for other CHO areas? For other geographical areas, is it the same? I would be very interested in finding out. I thank the Minister of State very much.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Senator. To reiterate, there is only one person waiting for funding approval in the CHO 2 area. That is what makes it so frustrating. Previously, the challenges we had were related to the number of people waiting for funding. In March of last year, 7,250 people were waiting for funding in the country. There are now only 1,400. Therefore, we have made huge strides. Efforts are ongoing to meet the demand for home support services. The HSE continues to advertise on an ongoing basis for healthcare assistants and

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recruit as many suitable candidates as possible. The HSE conducts its recruitment through a variety of channels.

The split between public and private provision is 50:50, but it varies depending on the CHO. On Tuesday of this week, I met representatives of Home and Community Care Ireland, which advocates for all the various groups, including Home Instead Senior Care and Bluebird Care. I am to speak at a conference in this regard at 12.30 p.m. today. Home care groups face huge recruitment challenges, as does the HSE.

We have agreed to set up a task force to examine the challenges. The Senator asked me whether the position is the same everywhere. It is not but rural areas are proving very difficult. There are many challenges in respect of private providers that do not offer mileage supports. That is also an issue.

Covid-19 Pandemic

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Butler. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir Currie as ligean dom labhairt ar dtús. I have a couple of technical questions. I appreciate that the Minister of State might not have all the technical answers but I trust that she will use her good offices to instruct officials to achieve clarity and to communicate. I initially submitted this matter to ask when the portal would be going live. We understand now that it was up yesterday but that it is going live today. Off the back of that, there has been some confusion. I would like to use this opportunity to give the Minister of State a platform to provide some information or get the word out because there are many watching this morning who want just that.

It is really welcome that this is happening in the first place and that citizens in the North, in particular, are able to avail of the EU entitlement, not least in the context of having lost so much as a result of Brexit.

11 o'clock

Will the Minister of State clarify that the way to obtain an EU digital certificate is through the online portal? Yesterday, it was the understanding of some people that if they did it through the Covid tracker app they would be able to get the EU digital certificate. It seems now that what they actually received is an EU-compliant proof of their vaccination in the North. Can one do it via the old app or is there a new app coming online or is the portal? What is the best way?

Second, in order to obtain the app through the portal one must have the North's digital certificate. That is only valid for three months and one must reapply each time. Do people have to reapply every three months for the EU digital certificate? Travel dates are required to obtain the digital certificate in the North. That is a problem for people who perhaps are not travelling but who want to travel from the North into the South and use their digital certificate to access entertainment, leisure or hospitality facilities.

Finally, the Minister of State will know that many people from the South, not least health-care workers, were encouraged to get vaccinated in the North. In order for them to apply for the EU digital certificate they need a certificate from the North, but to get the North's certificate they must be resident in the North and, obviously, they are not. I said this would be technical

and I hope I have not overwhelmed the Minister of State or other colleagues. I look forward to hearing from the Minister of State.

Senator Emer Currie: As the Senator said, this online portal is good news for Irish passport holders who were vaccinated in the North whereby they can apply for an EU digital Covid certificate. I, too, have technical questions.

What is the proof of vaccination that is required from the North? The Northern Ireland Covid vaccination certificate is issued by the Northern Ireland Department of Health so one must go through that portal process initially to get official proof of vaccination from the North. That comes from the *nidirect.gov.uk* website. One acquires that first and it is that quick response, QR, code, one's second QR code, that one uses to apply through the portal, *covidcertificate-portal.gov.ie*, for the EU digital certificate. I believe one must go through two portals and I am seeking confirmation of that. Is there a way to make it any easier? As my colleague said, the Northern Ireland Covid certificate is only for three months.

Some people think that if one just takes a picture of one's QR code and uploads it onto the Covid app, that is that. However, it is not as simple as that. We have to be very clear about that because it is all over social media. This has a big impact for cross-Border workers. There is a great deal of confusion so we must have very clear information. I believe it is where one received one's second vaccine that determines where one applies to get one's proof of vaccination.

I have another question. Although this is a facilitator, one still has to check the requirements for the country to which one is travelling and then the requirements for when one is returning. I believe the *reopen.europa.eu* website is the best place to check that information. Perhaps the Minister of State will confirm that because I have encountered some confusion about whether somebody can travel from Belfast or Derry airports or whether it must be Dublin.

There are many technical questions. We had them when the EU digital certificate launched and we have them now. The more information the Minister of State can give to us to get the word out, the better.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Senators for their questions and I will do my best to answer them with the details that have been provided to me. I thank them for the opportunity to speak on the online portal. The EU digital Covid certificate introduced in July provides the framework for the issuance, verification and acceptance of inter-operable Covid certificates. The EU digital Covid certificate is a proof that a person has either been vaccinated against Covid-19, received a negative Covid-19 test result or recovered from Covid-19. They are the three criteria. The purpose of the digital Covid certificate is to facilitate free movement.

Due to significant and productive cross-government collaboration we were successfully able to overcome the initial impediments and complications that come with any large-scale project. With more than 4 million certificates issued, this project has helped support the safe reopening of our society. It has also been used in Ireland and in other EU member states, domestically, for facilitating safe access to indoor hospitality, supporting the reopening of our economy. Only a small number of EU countries, including France, are choosing to issue EU digital Covid certificates to their citizens who were vaccinated abroad. However, yesterday it was announced that we would take first steps towards implementing this option and expanding the service to allow Irish passport holders who have been vaccinated in a third country to access an EU digital

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Covid certificate. This service is now available to Irish citizens who have been vaccinated in Northern Ireland and it will extend to Irish citizens vaccinated in further areas outside of the EU in October.

The dedicated online portal currently accepts applications from Irish citizens vaccinated in Northern Ireland who hold a Northern Irish Covid vaccination certificate with a QR code. Irish citizens resident in Ireland who have been vaccinated in Northern Ireland may also apply. Through the online portal, individuals will be asked to upload a copy of their Irish passport, upload their reliable proof of vaccination in the form of their Northern Ireland vaccination certificate and give their consent to process the data for this specific purpose. If the person provides satisfactory proof of identity and vaccination, the EU digital Covid certificate will be sent to the person by email. The online portal will be expanded to accept applications from Irish citizens vaccinated in other non-EU countries from 21 October. Initially, therefore, it is for Northern Ireland and people living in the South who were vaccinated in Northern Ireland.

The EU digital Covid certificate initiative is quickly emerging as the robust international standard for Covid certification, as evidenced by the joining of an additional 16 countries which are recognised as equivalents under the initiative. The Government is pleased to be able to put Ireland in the lead in ensuring these certificates are more widely available to our citizens. Everybody will accept and acknowledge that there were impediments initially for the original digital Covid certificate, but they were ironed out very quickly. My 15-year-old received the second vaccine and by that evening the certificate had arrived, although it is not viable for 14 days until the timeline had passed. It is happening very quickly for somebody who receives the second Covid vaccine.

I hope I managed to answer most of the Senators' questions. If not, I will certainly get them a more comprehensive response.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Eugene Murphy): Due to the Minister of State's efficiency in replying I will not have to divide the time into 30 seconds each. I will give 50 seconds each, but please try to stay within that time.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: The 50:50 approach is always good. I thank the Minister of State for her reply. I appreciate that there were many technical questions and we might need that additional information if she could furnish us with it.

I have two brief points, and Senator Currie referred to them. People had intended this from a genuine and sincere motivation. We are sure they were trying to assist online yesterday. However, what is clear to me, and we must get clarity on this if the Minister of State cannot give it, is that if people applied through the Covid tracker app yesterday they received an EU compliant certificate but they do not have the EU digital certificate. Some people are under the misapprehension that they have it, sin é, and they may not. I want to try to get that message out through this opportunity today.

There was talk about a dedicated helpline. It might be worth ensuring that it is up and running. With the greatest will in the world Senator Currie, myself and others will do our best to furnish people with information, but we are not the Department of Health so it would be good if that could get up and running as soon as possible for those who have questions. The Minister of State might also consider encouraging the Department to undertake a publicity drive in the North through some of the local newspapers whereby it could advertise the details of this so

people will know and have a direct and local interface with this portal and will be able to get that information as close to home as possible.

Senator Emer Currie: We have to promote this with all the technical information to answer the questions people have. The important thing is that unless one gets an email from the Department to confirm that one has this, one does not have it. If it is arriving by email, we have to tell people that. It is not enough for them to go through their tracker apps. People have to go through the process of two portals and then it will arrive in their inboxes.

We have to accept that we do not have control over the efficiency of the first process and that there is a backlog. We will have to put that up the food chain and ask if the two Ministers can talk about this to make sure it is working as efficiently as possible. This is sensitive to us. It is about EU citizens being entitled to EU benefits and that is an important message.

Deputy Mary Butler: To reiterate, through the online portal, individuals will be asked to upload a copy of their Irish passport, upload their reliable proof of vaccination in the form of their Northern Ireland vaccination certificate, and give their consent to process the data for this specific purpose. I am open to correction on this but I would imagine that given the way it has happened here, one's certificate would either be sent by post or email and in the main they were emailed. As I said, each applicant must show proof of a valid Irish passport and of their vaccination certificate with a quick response, QR, code issued by the Department of Health in Northern Ireland. The service is also available to Irish passport holders who are cross-border workers and who have received their vaccination in Northern Ireland. Every effort is being made to ensure that these certificates will be issued in a timely manner.

While the expansion begins with Irish passport holders vaccinated in Northern Ireland, it does not end there. Teams are currently assessing vaccine certificates issues from third countries to support the application process. Specific requirements for vaccination proof will be published prior to the launch of the second phase on 21 October. At this point, applications will be accepted from the Irish diaspora far and wide. The new portal will enable Irish citizens abroad to apply for an EU digital Covid certificate so I hope that answers the Senator's question. It is a new portal and not the app that is already there and citizens can use this to ease their travel across the EU.

The Senator raised the issues of collaboration between the two Ministers and the possibility of advertisements. I will bring all those issues back and hopefully Senators have received some new information today. It takes time for anything new to bed down but it is a welcome move that this is happening.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: I forgot to wish the Minister of State a happy birthday, which I probably should have done.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Eugene Murphy): I did not know that. The fourth commencement matter was in my name and was on the need for the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works to make a statement on the implications of the recent High Court order to temporarily halt the flood release works at Lough Funshinagh, County Roscommon. I have had to withdraw that Commencement matter and I will explain at a later date why it was withdrawn. I apologise to the Cathaoirleach and staff, who were good enough to accept it as a Commencement matter. Regrettably, I had to withdraw it. I thank Members and the staff for their co-operation.

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Sitting suspended at 11.13 a.m and resumed at 11.30 a.m.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the Deputy Leader to outline the Order of Business today, I note that on 3 October 1990 Germany achieved reunification after a long period of division. Ireland is proud of our role in facilitating the momentous events in German history, chairing the crucial meeting in Dublin during our Presidency of the European Council, which led to pan-European support for German reunification. Indeed, Chancellor Helmut Kohl is said to have thanked the Taoiseach with the words, “Germany will never forget what you have done for us.” The relations between our two countries stretch back much further. St. Killian, who left Ireland, along with other monks, arrived in Germany in the 7th century and established enduring links between our two countries.

This year, we mark 100 years since the fledgling Irish State appointed its first official representative to Germany - Nancy Wyse Power - to set up an office to promote Irish interests. Ireland and Germany share a strong bilateral relationship that is anchored in our strong economic cultural, social and political links. What defines our relationship is our work together in the European Union where our countries share a common vision and purpose on how to achieve a stronger and more effective Europe, and a better world. I wish the ambassador and all of the people in Germany *alles gute zum tag der Deutschen einheit*.

Senator David Norris: *Bravo.*

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the father of the House, Senator Norris, and invite the Deputy Leader to outline the Order of Business today.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Lisa Chambers: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the report of the Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union entitled the Interim Report on the Impacts of Brexit, to be taken at 1 p.m. and not withstanding anything in Standing Orders to conclude at 2 p.m., if not previously concluded, with time allocated to the opening remarks of the proposing Senator not to exceed four minutes, all Senators not to exceed four minutes and the Minister’s contribution not to exceed ten minutes and the proposing Senator to be given no less than two minutes to reply.

An Cathaoirleach: Does the father of the House wish to speak on the Order of Business?

Senator David Norris: Yes, and I very much appreciate the kindness of the Cathaoirleach.

I learned in the last few days of the death of Mervyn Taylor. I was very sorry to hear of his passing. He was a quintessential liberal. As a Minister, he spoke out and acted decisively on contraception, which was a challenging discussion at that time. He was the first Jewish Cabinet Minister in Ireland. He was also a chairman of the Labour Party. He was devoted, of course, to Israel. The only difference that I had with him was when I spoke out on behalf of the human rights of the Palestinians but that was soon reconciled and covered over.

I was several times entertained by him and his wife at dinner. I remember him with great affection and respect. I would like to send my sympathy to his wife, Marilyn, and to his children, Adam, Gideon and Maryanne. I remember him with affection.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator for remembering Mervyn Taylor and his service to the State. He took on challenges that the State was often afraid to take on and brought rights to people who had fought, like Senator Norris, long and hard to achieve those rights. I thank the Senator for remembering him today and extend our condolences to the family of Mervyn Taylor.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I very much agree with Senator Norris. Mervyn Taylor was certainly a very forward thinking politician. I read an article about him in recent days on how many friends that he had in other political parties. He was a really good man. It is very appropriate that Senator Norris should mention him today and I am sure that all Members would agree.

I wish to briefly refer to two items. It is coming up to budget time and old age pensioners need to be respected, and thought about, in a very serious way. I hope the Minister for Finance and the Minister for the Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, will look very sympathetically at giving a good rise to our old age pensioners. Our old age pensioners have served all their lives and have done their bit for society. Many of them have raised their families and, in today's world, many of them give financial help to their children and grandchildren. It would be very wrong of the State, despite the difficulties we face, and the many financial challenges we will face, not to treat our pensioners well. I hope that a message will go out loud and clear from everybody here today that when budget time comes that pensioners would be well looked after, particularly as they still do a lot of good service for this country.

I wish to briefly discuss the serious problem that we will have with energy supply. I know the Government and Minister are making every effort to ensure we do not have blackouts this winter and, hopefully, this will not happen. Let me say clearly that I understand what we need to do in terms of the environment. I understand the difficulty and danger posed by fossil fuels. Let me be quite clear about that. I support Government policy in dealing with that but in the short term, I would like the Government to look at the possibility of re-opening two peat-powered power stations in my part of the country on a temporary basis. One station is in Lanesborough while the other is in Shannonbridge. Of course, it is not the right thing to do in terms of the environment but in the short term, it is very important that we keep the lights on in this country. When we speak about the just transition, initially we were told it would be eight years, then it went down to two and then lower than that. We all co-operated with that and we know what we need to do but I am asking that for a two or three-year period, we re-open those power stations to assure people that they will have a supply of power not just in their homes but in their businesses. This is really important and is a real challenge for us. In the short term, it is the right thing to do. I am not going against climate change measures we need to take. I understand that but the first crisis involves keeping our lights on and, hopefully, this will be taken into consideration.

Senator Seán Kyne: On behalf of Fine Gael, I wish to be associated with the comments from Senator Norris regarding the late Mervyn Taylor. He was a ground-breaking politician and we remember him here this morning.

It was with some disbelief that farmers read the headline "Brazil to add 24m cattle as Ire-

land plans to cut herd” in the *Irish Farmers’ Journal* over the summer. I do not believe that the Government plans to cut the national herd. Indeed the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has been clear in saying that we need a consistent level in the national herd. We know the efficiency with which beef is produced in this country, be it in Galway, Mayo or other locations across the country. It makes no sense and in fact would be immoral to cut the herd only for it to be replaced by beef from Brazil with the clear-felling of trees that is taking place there. The Government is to publish the climate action plan 2021 in the coming weeks which, according to the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, will bring forward policies and measures to support the delivery of the programme for Government commitment to achieve a 51% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 and put us on a pathway to climate neutrality no later than 2050. Farmers want and indeed need to do their bit. There is no ambiguity about that.

I ask for a debate in the coming weeks with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine on the sectoral plans for agriculture in advance of the climate action plan. Teagasc has done and is doing tremendous research with regard to emissions reduction in our herd. Earlier slaughter dates, as highlighted by Teagasc in Athenry in the Newford herd, have the potential to reduce national emissions as an alternative to herd reduction. The use of clover and multi-species swards is being trialled on a commercial scale as a means of reducing nitrogen. That is what Teagasc is doing in Grange in Dunsany. The benefits of clover have long been known about in terms of fixing nitrogen. It would be a regressive step to cut our national herd. I do not believe there is an appetite, desire or need to pursue that approach. It is within our means in respect of research in Teagasc and elsewhere to carry out a range of initiatives that can reduce emissions in the agricultural and environmental sectors, including additional planting of trees, particularly deciduous trees and creating riparian zones. There is significant potential regarding carbon sequestration and reducing emissions without impacting the national herd, which is so important in terms of rural Ireland, small communities and keeping people in rural Ireland. I look forward to a debate on areas surrounding the action in the coming weeks with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Having listened to the two Government speakers so far, I could easily be persuaded to give way so that we could hear from the Minister of State, Senator Hackett. I think everybody would want me to sit down if the Minister of State wished to get to her feet. What it brings out is the complexity of these issues. Those of us from rural Ireland are very concerned that as we go forward to take the measures we must take to mitigate the effects of climate change, not just in our own country but particularly with the poorest people in the world in mind, we must cover our flank as well and look to our energy and economic security. The worry a lot of people might have is that the measures we are offered that will improve things might not make up the shortfall. We need a discussion about nuclear power in that context so that we can make progress and do our duty to this generation and the next regarding climate change.

I may appear to contradict myself over the next couple of minutes. That may not come as a surprise to some people but-----

Senator David Norris: That could never happen.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I am over 50 now David. Gambling with Lives is a charity in Northern Ireland that has begun an important pilot programme to bring the message of the problem of gambling addiction to young people in Northern Ireland, where it is a particular problem. We also know that it is a significant issue in the South. Senator Ward and others are

to be commended for their Bill banning betting on the outcome of the national lottery, which proceeded last night, as is Senator Wall for his proposed Bill to restrict gambling advertising. However, there is a real danger that if we all say, as I am sure we all would, that we want to discourage gambling among younger people, we will be seen to talk out of both sides of our mouths as long as we do not bring forward the serious measures necessary to tackle gambling. The long-promised gambling regulator is second only to the long-promised electoral commission. The reality is that it is not enough to ban betting on the outcome of the national lottery. There is too much advertising of the national lottery on television. I understand that Senator Ward's excellent Bill has a carve-out that would allow gambling advertising around sporting events to proceed. That is the problem. I understand the issue. I think the betting tax is bringing in €100 million with nearly €80 million of that going to Horse Racing Ireland and 20% of the take going to the greyhound industry. Therefore, yes there will be a gap to be filled but we are either serious about the problem of gambling or we are not.

This is the moment when I am going to contradict myself briefly. Although one would not encourage anybody to embark on a career in gambling, the remarkable story of Barney Curley, who got the Human Dignity award in this House and went on to raise over €6 million for missionaries, hospitals and schools in Africa through his charity Direct Aid for Africa, will be remembered today at Bellewstown races, which I hope to attend. The famous Frankie Dettori will ride there. Direct Aid for Africa has raised over €75,000. That was a wonderful contribution made by a guy who made his living through gambling but who had a much more serious dimension to his life. I recommend that people listen to Frankie Dettori's interview with Clare Byrne yesterday where he talked about the wisdom and spoke quite openly about the religious and philosophical depths of Barney Curley. I said to myself that this must be what listening to RTÉ in the 1950s was like. Some producer in there was getting chest pains. It was such a positive presentation but it was really moving and I recommend that people listen to it because it was about one amazing contribution by one very fine man and I am very glad we did honour him in this House in 2015.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator did appear to contradict himself but for a good cause. Remembering Barney is appropriate given the amount of good he did with his earnings.

Senator Pippa Hackett: I will follow on from much of Senator Kyne's contribution. Seven months ago, a headline in the *Irish Farmers' Journal* carried some bad news. It read, "Fertiliser prices jump on the back of tight supplies". This week, Bloomberg claimed things were getting even worse and that Europe has a fertiliser crisis and prices are spiking. There are some tough times ahead for many of our farmers. Goods based on fossil fuels have shaped our society and fertiliser is one of them.

In the same way we cannot live without plastics, much of the grass that farmers grow cannot live without chemical fertiliser. We are all hooked. As the price of fossil fuels continues to rise, might this be time to ask does it have to be this way and can we do things differently? This programme for Government commits us to delivering an ambitious reduction in the use of inorganic nitrogen fertiliser through to 2030. It does not say by how much but it does say we must do it without undermining family opportunity.

Last week, I visited a dairy farmer on the Cork-Waterford border and I want to tell his story to the House. This farmer is no green romantic and is not an organic producer. He is an intensive farmer who milks 200 cows on 265 acres, along with his father's 60-acre farm to carry his replacement heifers and to grow some forage crops. He is a tough businessman with an enter-

prise that needs to deliver for him and his young family but he believes that in the long term, his farm also needs to deliver for his soil. In 2018, recognising that his standard perennial ryegrass production system required a great amount of fertiliser and a stable climate, he decided to change tack. He started introducing multispecies swards as part of his re-seeding programme, planting multiple varieties of grasses, clovers and herbs. He also started decreasing his use of chemical nitrogen. As he decreased his chemical use, he waited to see if the grass would stop growing. It did not. He waited to see if milk yields would drop. They did not. This year, he applied no chemical nitrogen to the grazing ground at all, yet continues to see yields maintained and improved profitability.

I know that one swallow does not make a summer and that this farmer's results do not constitute a scientific study but this farm is producing approximately 8,000 l of milk per cow *per annum*, which is well above the national average and has saved close on €40,000 this year alone on fertiliser and application costs. Chemical fertilisers can do a great job of feeding a certain type of grass but it is not necessary on multispecies swards, which draw on nature's nutrients for growth. This is regenerative agriculture with healthy soil and healthy cattle thriving on a tasty and nutritious mixture of crops, however wild and uneven they might look to the casual observer. What this farmer is doing may not work for every farmer but every farmer should at least think about what is happening on that farm. I know what I saw, which was a strong family-run dairy business based on healthy soil and a farm bursting with biodiversity. I would really like to believe too that I saw the future.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister of State and I now call on Senator Warfield.

Senator Fintan Warfield: Members will be aware that there are approximately 13 institutions that archive everything published in the State, including physical documents and books. These institutions are legal deposit libraries. The National Library of Ireland is one, Trinity College Dublin is another, as is the University of Limerick, UL. I raise an issue that has been going on for some years now, which is the inability of the National Library of Ireland, to, for example, to archive the web. In the past, I have met representatives of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment with Senator Norris and Deputy Bacik when the Copyright and Other Intellectual Property Law Provisions Bill came before the Houses. The Seanad passed my amendment to that Bill at the time but it was taken out later by the then Minister of State, John Halligan. The issue here is that we are losing material. As the average webpage lasts about 100 days, contrary to the common narrative, what goes online does not stay there forever.

The alarming loss of digital material means that there is going to be a black hole in our nation's memory. I am thinking about referendum campaigns, websites from all sides of these campaigns and the debates that took place. As even political websites and those of politicians that disappear will not be archived, there will be a black hole in our memory.

In response to Deputy Conway-Walsh, who asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when a feasibility study would be carried out by way of establishing a digital legal deposit scheme for large-scale systematic and sustained archiving of the Irish web, that is, the *.ie* domain, the Minister said she hoped to bring forward a report in the coming months. There are three possible outcomes to this report. One is that the National Library of Ireland will provide an archive of the *.ie* domain on-site in Kildare Street. The other outcome is that it will be able to share that online with Irish people and the Irish diaspora. The worst outcome is that the library would at least be able to save it and archive it for now, until we all see sense and archive the web so that it lasts. I will table a Commencement matter on this issue

but I want to call on the Government to bring forward this report as soon as possible.

In my last 20 seconds I also want to say that in advance of the project we need to keep the baseline figure for the arts as it is and we need to see the Government coming forward with whatever it wants to propose around a universal basic income. I have my own issues with that idea but I want to see the proposals that the Government has talked about for some time.

Senator Mark Wall: I thank and join with Senator Norris in remembering the late, great Mervyn Taylor. We were all very proud of Mervyn Taylor in the Labour Party and what he did for this country. As Senator Norris has said, it is very important to remember him and his family today.

On Senator Mullen's contribution, today is the last day before we were to have the promised publication of the gambling control Bill. This was to happen on the last day of this particular month. I hope that we get to see that Bill and that we get the opportunity to debate it as quickly as possible for the benefit of many people. I join with Senator Mullen in calling for that.

I have been contacted in recent days by a growing number of parents in the town of Castledermot, County Kildare, whose children are attending secondary school and indeed a third level college in nearby Carlow. Not for the first time, these students have been left on the side of the road because the scheduled bus is full and cannot take them or any more passengers when it reaches the town. On Monday last, seven students were left standing on the side of the road in the town. What is all the more frustrating for them and for their parents is that all of these students had purchased tickets in advance, yet when they rang the operator they were told that the operator could not take any further passengers.

I have previously spoken in this House about the 880 route, which serves the town and nearby Carlow. Local Link has sought an extension of this particular route and I am told this is still with the National Transport Authority, NTA, which tells me it is waiting on funding from Government.

I raise with the Deputy Leader the need to debate rural transport here in the House and it is a call I have made before. Towns like Castledermot in south Kildare are crying out for more transport. I look forward to the Deputy Leader organising such a debate because the Local Link service says that it is at the pin of its collar in trying to provide more services.

Another urgent debate that we need to have is on rail transport and its costs. Over the past number of weeks I have been contacted by a growing number of students from south Kildare, who for reasons that my Labour Party colleagues have outlined here in debates in the past week and, indeed, through the introduction of Bills, are finding it impossible to get student accommodation any more in Dublin. Instead, they have to stay at home and take the train, which should be good news for them in that it may lead to them saving some money. The problem, however, is that stations like Portarlinton, Monasterevin, Athy, Kildare town and Newbridge are outside the Short Hop zone and the students cannot use their Leap cards. In one such example, a young student from Monasterevin should be paying €27 per week with his Leap card and instead is paying €100 per week, so he might as well be staying in Dublin. We need to look at a mechanism where these students who are staying at home can use their Leap cards and are not forced to pay the full fare.

I would also like to raise commuter costs and the increased carbon footprint of those commuters who are getting into their cars every morning in Newbridge and travelling to Sallins

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because of the Short Hop fare. I am sure we can have that debate into the future but we need to have a debate on rural transport and to protect those students who cannot find accommodation in Dublin but yet are paying such high costs in trying to travel up and down there each day.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I wish to propose a change to the Order of Business, “That No. 12 on the Order Paper be taken before No. 1”.

I will start by thanking Sebastian McAteer for the drafting of the legislation that I have placed on the Order Paper today. Only this week, the Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Climate Action heard that while data centres currently represent 11% of grid capacity, the energy used by those existing connections will rise to almost 30% of overall capacity by the end of the decade. If all other data centres proposed for Ireland are allowed, their energy use would comprise 70% of the capacity on the national grid. This Bill, however, has its foundations in the CDP’s Carbon Majors Report of 2017, which found that just 100 companies had been responsible for 71% of the global emissions since 1988. Corporations make significant contributions to global carbon emissions and must be held to account for their environmental impacts.

12 o’clock

Climate justice is not possible if State responses to climate change focus only on targeting individual consumption through carbon taxes, impacting low-income communities with low carbon footprints to boast, without also tackling, at the other end of the scale, the big polluters which create the most carbon emissions. In this context it is clear that legislation requiring private companies operating in Ireland to make mandatory public disclosures on the greenhouse gas emissions arising from their activities in the State is a necessity. Such a measure is built on the principles of transparency and accountability, the idea being that if companies are required to publish their emissions every year, public scrutiny and pressure and environmental considerations will cause them to adopt policies that will reduce their emissions.

The companies emissions reporting Bill 2021 is tabled in the same vein as a similar legal requirement in this area that has been adopted in other jurisdictions, notably the United Kingdom. It would require the disclosure of audited statements of greenhouse gas emissions by companies with more than 50 employees to the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and includes a number of other important provisions. It is tabled in the spirit of ensuring that the burden of responding to climate change falls equitably and proportionally between those who make the greatest contribution, in keeping with the polluter pays principle, and to support climate justice and a just transition.

Senator Paul Daly: I wish to be associated with the very eloquent tribute - eloquent as always - that Senator Norris paid to Mervyn Taylor. Go ndéana Dia trócaire ar a anam.

It will come as no surprise to anybody here that I wholeheartedly agree with and support Senator Kyne’s request and statement.

I will not respond to every Senator other than to say in response to Senator Mullen that I just wish I was available to accompany him this evening to the famous Hill of Crockafotha and the Bellewstown races.

There was a statement post last week’s Cabinet meeting that the existing land conveyancing legislation will be amended. We are all aware of this because I have no doubt I am not the only one who has been lobbied a great deal recently about the upcoming deadline for the registration

of rights of way. I welcome the fact that, as I said, the statement from Cabinet said there will be legislation to deal with this. While I am not looking for a debate on same, as I know we will have plenty of opportunity to discuss that Bill when it reaches us, I plead that this House convey the need for a public awareness campaign, be it as part of the legislation coming forward or as an accompanying element of the Bill. In my opinion, the problem arose due to the lack of awareness of people who were made aware only following inheritance, succession or purchase of property that if a right of way was involved, it had to be registered. We had a lot of lobbying from the Law Society, the Bar Council and the farm representative bodies, so I strongly urge that this House communicate to Minister and the Department that there could be something incorporated into the legislation coming to us that would include an awareness campaign and that people would be informed in order that, at the end of whatever extension is being proposed, we will not be inundated again with requests for a further extension. This deadline was extended in 2011 for ten years to 2021. One would imagine a ten-year extension would have facilitated everybody out there but, as I have said previously, the problem was not that people did not want to do this but that they were not aware of it. There is no point in changing legislation or moving out a deadline if we do not inform the people of their requirements to register those rights of way, be that through the media or through direct contact with property owners. This is a vital part of what is coming down the line.

Senator Tim Lombard: We are in the middle of a decade of commemorations that started in 2016. We have handled it quite competently and capably in the context of issues such as 1916 and the first sitting of the First Dáil. I think next year will be a very important year when it comes to commemorations. We have the 100-year commemoration of the first sitting of the Seanad to look forward to next year. However, I think the Civil War issues will be the key focus for the next 12 to 14 months, and a very sensible and pragmatic debate on those issues is required. In my part of west Cork we will talk about August 1922 and Michael Collins's demise. Seán Hales was shot in December of that year. The Church of Ireland bishop of Cork famously said in 2017 that the Protestant community in west Cork would look upon the commemorations with some dread. It is a very sensitive issue and, I think, one in which this House will play a very important role.

We need a debate on how we will deal with these issues because they are quite sensitive and very raw for some. I believe it is appropriate that this House now get involved in that debate. There is a very important role for both the Cathaoirleach and the Leader in that regard. This House can play a key role in marking these commemorations, from the first sitting of the Seanad all the way up to the Civil War itself, in a sensible and appropriate way.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Senator Lombard. The Ceann Comhairle and I have been working on the issue of the decade of commemorations and we have an Oireachtas commemoration committee, which I am proud to chair and which has representatives from the various groupings. Obviously, everybody's opinions and ideas will be welcome because, as we approach the centenary of the beginning of the Civil War and the Civil War itself, it is a sensitive time and, as we have seen from other commemorations, they have to be handled appropriately and in the right way. People come to them with a generous spirit. We can make sure we do this in a spirit of remembrance and remember what we were fighting for and not what we were fighting against.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Ba mhaith liom dhá cheist a ardú inniu. I wish to raise the question of foreign births registration, which is the responsibility of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Prior to Covid, it took 12 to 18 months to process applications, but during Covid the

whole process was frozen. There was no progressing of any of the applications, and anyone who now wants to register a foreign birth for the purpose of naturalisation as an Irish citizen cannot do so. The Department of Foreign Affairs simply will not accept applications. I know of one instance in which somebody who has lived here almost his entire life, since not long after birth, has had an application in for two years and there has been no progress made on it. There are a number of others in a similar situation. I therefore ask the Deputy Leader to write on our behalf to the Department of Foreign Affairs to ask it to reopen the foreign births registration process and to expedite some of these matters.

Second, I welcome the fact that tonight there is - I hate using the phrase - a pilot nightclub event taking place at the Button Factory in Dublin. People are able to get out and dance, enjoy themselves and form relationships. I used a phrase here last November which people will recall. I thought it was interesting that Áine Lawlor on “Morning Ireland” asked Sunil Sharpe rather gingerly in respect of the event tonight if there will there be kissing. Frankly, I hope there will and I hope that people are able to get back out-----

Senator Rónán Mullen: The only flashing light will be the pilot light.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Yes, and I am sure that if Senator Mullen had a ticket, rather than going to Bellewstown, he would be there tonight.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I will stick to the races.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: A very serious issue is raised, though, because the night-time industry has been closed for 18 months. Nightclubs have not been open. I refer to the licensing fee legislation and the fact that so many late bars and nightclubs now have to pay for special exemption licences after the difficulties they have been through. Because they have to pay for them in advance, I do not think it is unreasonable to ask that there be at least a moratorium on these, if not their complete abolition, in the context of the Government’s plan to open up night-life. I ask, as we move to 22 October and the next phase of reopening, that real regard be given to the nightclub and nightlife sector.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I do not think I will be going to that nightclub tonight. Those days are well behind me.

I wish to raise an issue relating to Housing for All. I have spoken to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and to my local authority. I fully back the Government’s plans, but there is an issue when it comes to affordable housing, that is, that under the matrix that is used as to what is called the affordability challenge and the criteria, there are upwards of 12 local authorities that will not be in a position to have an affordable housing scheme. It is not housing for all if a large number of counties cannot have such a scheme. The matrix that is employed uses CSO figures on the values of housing, not on the actual build cost of housing, which is wrong. I will give an example from my county, where there is only a handful of three-bed semi-detached houses with an average price of €150,000. To build them today would cost €220,000. No private building is going on. As a result of the use of the matrix we are not eligible. It might be said that there is a shared equity scheme but no developer is building houses so there are no houses for people to buy. It needs to be looked at. If we are going to have Housing for All, and I fully back it, this is an issue. All counties must be eligible. We are one of only 12.

As I am speaking about housing, I happened to meet Paddy Diver and his family along with

several other families outside the front of Leinster House this morning. It is heart-wrenching to see the situation they are in. It is something that has not affected my area, thank God, but our hearts can only go out to the families when we meet them and see the situation they are in. One couple had been hoping to live in their garage when their house was being rebuilt. Today they found out this cannot happen and the whole lot has to be demolished. As I said, I spoke to Paddy and his family. He had the blocks out there and it is worthwhile going out to see them if they are still there. I was able to crumble a block in my hand, not with a hammer but with my hand. That is the situation they and thousands of other families are in. It is incumbent on us as a State to stand behind our citizens. I know much work is being done on it. There has to be 100% redress and no less. This is from meeting the families and crumbling a block in my hand.

Senator Emer Currie: I believe in building sustainable communities and part of this is sustainable transport. I acknowledge that in my area the DART+ west consultation is under way at present. We have had BusConnects, the Royal Canal greenway consultation and the Phoenix Park transport strategy consultation. We have secured significant investment under the safe routes to school programme. There is forthcoming consultation on a canal loop between the Grand Canal and the Royal Canal. A dizzying number of projects are also under consideration by Fingal County Council in terms of strategic infrastructure and active travel. There is a huge amount going on. Of course we know these are plans. With regard to active travel particularly, these are all plans but none has been confirmed or is going to construction stage. We really need to have a debate and a discussion with the Minister on all of the projects that could be going ahead and the ones that will not be going ahead. I found out a project was not going ahead in my area involving the first part of the Royal Canal from Westmanstown on the Kildare border to Clonsilla. It was going to be started but it was decided not to go ahead with it. It worries people when they do not see progression. We have seen the Hartstown cycle route and a segregated cycle way into my local park, St. Catherine's Park. This was the subject of my first motion as a councillor. A huge number of plans are being discussed but people do not know what is going ahead in terms of active transport. Coupled with everything that is going ahead with national consultations, we need to bring in the Ministers and have discussions on our areas and what is happening with major transport infrastructure and active transport.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: I was not in the Chamber yesterday for the Order of Business. I was not physically present but, as Senators do, I viewed it on the monitor in my office. The Cathaoirleach will be glad to hear I will not make any comment on the controversy of recent weeks in respect of the President of Ireland. Suffice it to say I admire the President. I will not say that yesterday the Cathaoirleach agreed to disagree but he had a different perspective to another Member of the House.

An Cathaoirleach: To be clear, it is not that I have a different perspective, it is the Constitution has a different perspective on-----

Senator Vincent P. Martin: I will comment on that.

An Cathaoirleach: -----the separation of powers and the Presidency. That is the issue.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: Yes and I have no doubt the Cathaoirleach correctly interpreted what he called a practice of the House. My problem is that in due course that practice should be appropriately reviewed. Yesterday, the Cathaoirleach said to a Member of the House, which celebrates freedom of speech, that we can praise the President all we wish but the practice of the House is not to criticise. I respect the decision of the Cathaoirleach. I am sure it is accurate.

The Cathaoirleach has been rigorously fair in all his rulings.

An Cathaoirleach: For the benefit of Members, Article 13.8.1^o states, “The President shall not be answerable to either House of the Oireachtas [...] for the exercise and performance of the powers and functions of his office or for any act done or purporting to be done by him in the exercise and performance of those powers or functions”.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: I am not questioning that. I am saying to a grown up Seanad that if there is any long-looming shadow of the words of the former Minister, Paddy Donegan, in the 1970s it is time to put them to bed and have a mature debate. It is not comparing like with like. I say this as an admirer of the President. I would detract from my fundamental comments if I were to comment on the controversy. I would also run the risk of falling out with the Cathaoirleach on a ruling. I am just saying it is ironic that the current officeholder repealed section 31 of the Broadcasting Act and is a passionate advocate for the freedom of speech. To have a ruling like this is akin to something we would see in a far-flung place at the other end of the world. It does not value or appreciate the fundamental rights of freedom of speech and democracy. I am not criticising the Cathaoirleach whatsoever. No doubt he interpreted it correctly. In this Chamber, which is tolerant and celebrates freedom of speech, I urge Members to review it through the appropriate channels and consider whether there is a more constructive and inclusive way forward in the longer term.

Senator John Cummins: In recent weeks, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage has had significant dialogue with Irish Water and officials from the Department on infrastructure deficits in water and wastewater, particularly in small towns and villages. A total of €97.5 million was approved by the Government and the regulator to allow Irish Water to set up a specific fund for the small towns and villages growth programme to focus on areas throughout the country that would not ordinarily be a priority for investment. Through collaboration with local authorities, areas were identified in every county to create additional capacity to service developments that have planning in place.

One such area is in my county of Waterford. In Lemybrien a local builder has planning permission for 19 housing units but cannot commence development because Irish Water has been dragging its heels regarding what work is required to facilitate upgrades to the network. I have been going back and forth on this matter over a number of months and it has been frustrating that at a time we have such a shortage of housing, priority cannot be given to progressing the relevant tests and designs to carry out this work. I am assured it will be done in October and I accept the bona fides of those who have given these commitments.

I have been informed in the past couple of hours that Lemybrien along with 20 other projects in rural and regional Ireland have been approved under the small towns and villages growth programme, to add to the 15 already announced earlier in the summer. This will represent an investment of almost €1 million in Lemybrien to upgrade water and wastewater networks. Even though there is a green light for these 21 projects, priority must now be given to carrying out the required testing and the design and procurement to ensure the projects are carried out without delay.

While I acknowledge these things take time I call for a streamlining of the process. I reiterate what I said at the committee meeting on access for Irish Water to the Part 8 planning process for these schemes. Procurement could be done alongside the planning process to speed up delivery of these projects in every town and village throughout the country.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I join with the father of the House in extending my sympathy to the family of the late Mervyn Taylor, a Trojan, progressive politician who was very brave, as was Senator Norris. Our country is a better place today because of Mervyn Taylor's time in office and I pay tribute to him.

I ask the Deputy Leader for a debate on the future of work in the context of the living wage, the minimum wage and the fact that we are facing significant labour shortages in our service and hospitality industries, to name but two. If one talks to those who work in those industries and owners of businesses, one will find that they are very worried about the future of work in our country and the availability of staff. It would cause all of us to pose questions and reflect on the real reason for the shortage of work. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has commissioned a very important strategy around apprenticeships. We have seen many services with reduced services and limited opening hours and availability because they do not have the personnel. This nation is very much dependent on tourism. I ask for that debate on work - if possible before the budget but if not, in the context of the budget debate in coming weeks.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I begin by addressing the comments of Senator Martin. Freedom of speech is not an unqualified absolute right. It has to be qualified and must operate within rules of responsibility, some of which are enshrined in the Constitution and the actions and operations of this House for the benefit and ease of the separation of powers.

I came in today to highlight a meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters this morning, which was fantastic because it was on the subject of the participation of people with disabilities in political, cultural, community and public life. We heard directly from the lived experience of people and their exclusion. No matter how well-intentioned or thoughtful our actions, we heard about how by default, we end up excluding. We heard from Joe McGrath speaking on behalf of the National Platform of Self Advocates. He was representing people with intellectual disabilities. He spoke about election literature and access to information about candidates and manifestos. Last week, I spoke about the ESRI report commissioned by the NDA on exclusion and access to education, the risk of poverty, literacy, digital literacy and access to all those. If we accepted that last week, then hearing Mr. McGrath's comments this morning and accepting the point that if people with disabilities are going to be more likely to be in poverty and are not going to have access to social media, digital skills and literacy, the first thing we must do is go to the representatives and those with lived experience and ask them what they want us to do not what we think they should be doing. It really brings home the whole point of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters, which is "nothing about us without us". We need to really remember that and as public representatives, bow to that first and foremost in all of our actions.

Senator John McGahon: I wish to raise YouTube's announcement that it will remove all videos that make false claims about vaccines and spread misinformation about Covid. I wish to ask YouTube, "Where on earth have you been for the last 18 months?" My God, thanks for waking up to this problem YouTube. YouTube should have taken this position in March 2020 when we saw misinformation about Covid spread like wildfire around the planet last summer. Now all of a sudden, YouTube has woken up to it. At least, it has woken up to it a bit quicker than some of the other major social media platforms. The reason is that, as a platform, YouTube is perhaps more insidious is because it allows grifters and con artists who are putting out the false narrative about vaccines to make money out of the views they are getting on it so it encourages people to be more outrageous and put more information out there because they are

making money out of it. This is the real danger with YouTube and this is why we have seen the spread of misinformation. I do not mean to be dramatic when I say this but people are being radicalised online by Covid misinformation. When we talked about radicalisation in recent years, people brought up ISIS - really horrible things in terms of religious radicalisation in the Middle East and other places - but people are being radicalised online by misinformation. It involves vulnerable people and those who are easily led and they are being led down this path by people who are making money from this misinformation. This is the case with YouTube. The more views you get, the more cash you get in your pocket so it makes sense to be more outrageous and go further down that rabbit hole of misinformation. On one level, I commend YouTube on what it has done this morning. Other platforms should follow suit but I would also like to ask YouTube, "Where on earth have you been for the last 18 months?" Talk about closing a door after the horse has bolted. It is outrageous that it is deciding to do it now but I am glad it has woken up with some sort of social conscience 18 months too late.

Senator Martin Conway: I agree fully with Senator McGahon in respect of YouTube. I was listening to Senator Seery Kearney's contribution regarding the Joint Committee on Disability Matters and the participation of people with disabilities in politics. As one of the very few people with a disability who is in active politics and has been elected, I could write a book about it and maybe I will write a book about some of the challenges and harassment of people in politics that exists to a large extent but that is for another day.

The eye clinic liaison officer position in Temple Street Children's University Hospital has resulted in a 70% increase in referrals to step-down services for children diagnosed with sight loss. I want to see an eye clinic liaison officer appointed to each hospital group in this country. For somebody diagnosed with sight loss, it is a very distressing and traumatic experience. Some consultants and eye care specialists are brilliant at referring people to step-down services while others are not so good but an eye clinic liaison officer is the conduit between the consultants and step-down services. The eye clinic liaison officer is the person with the expertise. It is a system that has worked enormously well, particularly in the UK. For an investment of about €700,000, if an eye clinic liaison officer was appointed to each hospital group, it would create much better and more equal access to step-down services.

As we enter a period where things are opening up, there is an issue with people with disabilities and their personal assistants attending events with them. If somebody who requires a personal assistant to help him or her goes to a concert, it is reasonable that the personal assistant be allowed to get into the concert or event for free because he or she is essential for the individual with the disability to be able to go and enjoy the experience. This needs to be looked at. We may need to examine whether legislation is required to mandate organisations to allow the personal assistants of people with disabilities to attend events with them.

Senator Maria Byrne: I wish to raise two issues. I have had many calls from people I know. My colleague, Senator Carrigy, will be happy that post offices will be able to provide facilities that banks cannot. Many banks have closed down or will close down in rural and urban areas, a lot of them are going cashless and ATMs are being closed down in many areas. It is a huge issue in my area. A colleague of mine in Callan, County Kilkenny, phoned me to tell me that there will no bank in the town as of the end of this week. The loss of such facilities creates fear among people. Older people are very upset because they cannot cope with banking online.

Recently, I heard from people in Family Carers Ireland due to the approaching budget. I wish to state that carers provide a very adequate facility and help to keep many people in their

homes. Carers also help to extend people's lives with the care they give them. We must consider introducing the following key aspects in the budget: increase the weekly carer's payment by €8; increase the carer's support grant to €2,000; provide a carer's pension to long-term family carers as many carers give up their jobs but when they reach retirement age they will not be entitled to anything due to making a reduced number of contributions; and invest €5 million in the carer's guarantee scheme to provide supports that protect the mental health and well-being of carers and the people they care for.

Senator Garret Ahearn: The review of the national development plan, NDP, is expected to be announced in Cork next week after agreement by the Cabinet. The NDP contains a lot of road projects of which the N20 from Cork to Limerick is one. In my view and that of a lot of people, the most important road project is the N24 that links Limerick to Waterford. Once that road is completed every single city in this country will be connected by a motorway. It is a real priority that the N24 project remains on the NDP.

There are a range of issues with the project. The Minister for Transport keeps talking about small bypasses and I am very worried about the fact that the Taoiseach, during a debate in the Dáil yesterday, spoke about small bypasses. I do not know how many times we must explain the situation. Everyone in County Tipperary, including Tipperary Town that needs a bypass, want the N24 to remain on the national development plan. It has to remain. The design is going through the planning process. The money has already been invested by the Government to continue the project so there is no reason to remove the project from the national development plan.

Once design and planning is done then one will start with a bypass, in conjunction with the full N24 road, of Tipperary Town. That is what the people of the town want as well. Incredibly, they have spent 20 years waiting for a road to bypass the town. We cannot start all over again with a single bypass for Tipperary Town and forget about all of the work that has been done on the N24 over the last number of years. I cannot stress enough the importance of the route network between Limerick and Waterford, and on to Wexford and Rosslare post Brexit. The route is a crucial link for the businesses and people across the region. As much as 80% of the route goes through Tipperary and the towns that the project will have an impact on is significant, and Tipperary Town more than any other town.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I formally second the amendment to the Order of Business proposed by Senator Ruane to introduce the Companies (Emission Reporting) Bill. The legislation is very important. We have clearly seen in the debates this week that our conversations cannot simply be discussions on energy supply and what we might substitute for something else. It must be about demand, and specifically commercial and industrial demand. This Bill would shine a light into different sectors that all need to be challenged to consider their consumption of energy and associated emissions. The Bill would provide us with the information for that. The Bill would ensure that we do not have situations as it seems have been allowed to happen where, for example, data centres, as one actor in the economy, have been allowed to monopolise a level of energy and, potentially, a level of emissions to the detriment of the citizens of this country and other commercial sectors. Shining a light to create transparency around emissions and energy consumption, as this Bill would do, is really important and I am very proud to second the amendment.

I look forward to reading Senator Conway's book. In the interim I suggest that the National Centre for Partnership and Performance, NCPP, or so forth could examine issues. Some very practical points were made about the Houses in terms of how we could be more inclusive and

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facilitate engagement by citizens who have a disability. This House showed leadership and passed the Irish Sign Language Act, in which the Cathaoirleach played a key role. It might be timely in the next couple of months to have a discussion on that legislation and how it is being implemented.

I wholeheartedly join in the tributes paid to Mervyn Taylor because the equality legislation he put in place-----

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: -----was one of the greatest steps towards us being a genuine nation of equals. It was one of the most fundamental contributions to our laws and culture, and conveyed to our citizens that this is a nation of equals.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I thank all of the Members who have contributed. I concur with the remarks made by Senator Norris and many other colleagues in the House on the death of the former Deputy, Mervyn Taylor. I extend my condolences, and that of the House, to his family, friends and to the Labour Party on the passing of a colleague.

Senator Murphy kicked off today's discussion by raising two issues. One was the old age pension, in the context of the budget, and a request for a significant rise so as to look after the elderly in our communities. The budget should look after not just the elderly in our communities but all vulnerable persons; those who are most at risk of falling below the poverty line and those most at risk following the Covid experience and still recovering.

Senator Murphy also mentioned the issue of energy supply. He has spoken passionately about the impact that closing the power stations at Lanesborough and Shannonbridge has had on his community, and the just transition. There is a secondary issue now of energy supply that needs to be addressed, and his recommendations and suggestions will be conveyed to the Minister.

Senator Kyne mentioned the reports in the media and the *Irish Farmers' Journal*, as did Senator Paul Daly and the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, on the ongoing conversation about dairy production, the national herd, the Mercusor issues and the production of beef in South America because we have now signed up to import some of that beef. There is a lot of fear in the farming community but farmers may be further ahead on the climate agenda than we sometimes give them credit for. They are very willing to put their shoulder to the wheel but must be allowed to make a living at the same time. We must strike the right balance and bring people with us.

Senator Mullen raised the issue of climate change and the need to explore the option of nuclear power. We need to be open to a wider debate on energy and find ways to meet our increasing energy demands now and into the future, particularly in the context of what we now know will be, in the Minister of State's words, a tight number of years in terms of the energy supply for the country. We need to address the matter.

Senator Mullen mentioned the need to tackle gambling addiction and he mentioned the community group in Northern Ireland called Gambling with Lives. Senator Wall has passionately spoken about tackling gambling addiction on a number of occasions and the imminent publication of the gambling legislation, which is overdue. We do have issues with gambling in this country. Gambling is quite pervasive and targeted at young people to get them hooked

early. These issues need to be tackled. Different aspects of society have an unhealthy relationship with funding from gambling companies, which is an issue that also needs to be addressed.

The Minister of State, Senator Hackett, spoke very well about the opportunities to change how things are done in farming. She told a very interesting story about a dairy farmer. I do not know his name but he stopped using chemical nitrates on his land with good results. She mentioned that such a switch may not work for everybody and we should embrace new ways of doing things to make things more environmentally friendly.

Senator Warfield mentioned the archiving of different aspects of Irish society and said that there could be a black hole if things are not locked into memory. He pleaded for the arts sector to receive adequate funding in the upcoming budget, with which I am sure Senators would agree. Senator Wall spoke about the gambling bill. He also spoke about rural transport. I agree with him that there is a big issue around that. Public transport is not the same in every aspect in every part of the country. Certainly, in my own county of Mayo, it is severely lacking. There are not many options for people in some parts of the country. An issue that has arisen in the recent months related to the student accommodation issue concerns young people having to travel to college. It is a very practical issue that we can deal with in the short term. We could potentially extend the zone to make it a little cheaper for those students. We should definitely look at that. It is quite an acute issue, this year in particular.

Senator Ruane proposed an amendment to the Order of Business, seconded by Senator Higgins, which I will be accepting, namely, to introduce a Bill to tackle emissions from companies. I agree with the Senator that in some ways we have been hoodwinked by many of the bigger polluters, probably over the last two decades, when the focus has been shifted onto the individual. We have spoken about the use of plastic straws, KeepCups and all of the little changes that we obviously need to make but that is not really tackling the climate problem. There is a small number of large companies, particularly the petroleum companies, that are the biggest polluters and emitters. The polluters should pay. I have no doubt that if there was mandatory disclosure from companies of what their emissions are, the public pressure would certainly change their direction in a much quicker way than otherwise might happen.

Senator Paul Daly concurred with the remarks of Senator Kyne and brought to the attention of the House the issue around the rights of way registration, which I believe was also raised last week. I welcome that legislation is coming on that issue but I agree with the Senator that if we do not tell people about it, it will not do much good and we will be back here in ten years' time looking for further extensions. It is a good suggestion.

Senator Lombard raised the issue of commemorations and how sensitive they are. We have had a couple of issues, even in the past few years, where comments around commemorations have raised tensions and have perhaps upset people in certain quarters. Therefore, it is an issue around which we have to tread carefully to be respectful of all views. I know that the Cathaoirleach is working intensely on the commemorations that this House will participate in for next year, in particular. There is a lot of work involved for all parties and none that are represented at that table. It is most important.

Senator Malcolm Byrne raised an issue around foreign birth registration service, which has ceased to operate during Covid and has not resumed. We will certainly raise the issue with the Department of Foreign Affairs to seek to get the service reopened.

In a complete change of direction, the Senator then welcomed the fact that a nightclub, the Button Factory, is reopening tonight. That is good to see. I do not know people will be doing at it, but I am sure they will be enjoying themselves, regardless. If the Senator is going, I hope he has a good time. It is good to be getting back to some nightlife. It is important for people to have that outlet. I wish the venue well tonight. I hope it goes well for everybody.

Senator Carrigy raised the issue around Housing for All, and suggested that some local authorities would not have the same access as others. I agree with the Senator that there has to be access for all across the board in every part of the country. The Senator also spoke very well about the mica issue and the families who are outside the gates of Leinster House today. They have been there throughout the month of September. They have been meeting with lots of parties and groups in the last number of months. They held a huge public protest outside the convention centre in the last term of the Dáil in July that was well attended. As I understand it, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage met the group last night. There were further developments. A memo is going to Cabinet, which has not been agreed yet. However, we are assured by the Minister that there will be significant changes to the scheme that brought in by the last Government. There will be significant changes to this scheme and it will be updated, hopefully to address the concerns of families who have been living in appalling situations for many years.

Senator Currie raised the issue of building sustainable communities and transport. I was almost jealous to hear her speak about the DART, BusConnects and other services that are just non-existent in so many parts of the country. However, I do appreciate that the pressures on public transport in the capital are clearly very different to what they might be in rural parts of the country. The Senator raised an important point. Many projects are being discussed, planned and talked about but perhaps we are not quite sure what is actually going to be delivered and when it will be delivered. That is an important clarification that is required.

Senator Martin raised an issue, which he skirted around. I am not entirely sure how to respond to the issue without breaching the rules myself. However, the issue he raised is an important one. We should not be afraid to review the current practice.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: Review, not change it.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I will go no further than that.

Senator Cummins raised the issue of Irish Water and the infrastructure deficit. It is a particularly acute issue in rural parts of the country, where smaller towns and villages were at the back of the queue. I welcome the additional almost €100 million in funding for those particular areas that should hopefully see an acceleration in the development of infrastructure that is needed. Without Irish Water infrastructure, we cannot build housing, so it goes hand in glove with the Housing for All policy that was announced by the Government.

Senator Buttimer raised the issue of the ongoing debate around a living wage. It perhaps correlates with the worker shortage that is being experienced in certain sectors, predominantly, hospitality and retail. Many of those sectors are finding it difficult to reopen fully because of the lack of workers available. Clearly, people are not going back to work for a particular reason. Part of that may be due to the levels of remuneration available in some of those sectors. That probably needs to be looked at.

Senator Seery Kearney raised the issue of disability and access for members of that com-

munity who have consistently feel excluded from all parts of Irish life. Interestingly, the Senator raised the issue of access to election material that we probably do not provide in all of the formats required to give full access to all members of society. That was an important point to make on the floor of the House.

Senator McGahon spoke about YouTube coming to the realisation recently that it needs to address the masses of false information on vaccines on its platforms. I welcome that it is doing so, even if it is quite late in the day. False vaccine information has caused huge damage. Thankfully, in this country, we have had a very high uptake rate in respect of vaccines. We have had one of the most successful vaccination programmes in the world. We have topped Bloomberg's list of countries that have been the most Covid-resilient and have handled it best. As a country, we have done very well. I commend our vaccine teams, the HSE and the Minister of Health on delivering a very successful vaccination programme. We were fortunate that the false information did not permeate through all aspects of the country and that people were able to decipher for themselves what information was false and what was not.

As he always does, Senator Conway spoke most passionately about disability and people having access to all aspects of life. He rightly pointed out that he is a fully elected active politician. Not many people with disabilities have served as Members of the Houses. It is something we need to address. The Senator then raised the specific issue of eye clinic liaison officers and there being a vacancy, and the fact that there is a need for that service in all of the hospital groups. I concur with that point. The level of funding required is small money in the overall scheme of the health budget but would make a huge difference to the lives of people who are experiencing sight loss and going through that traumatic journey they are on.

Senator Maria Byrne raised the issue around the closures of banks and the accelerated demise of retail banking. It is a reality of today and the world we are living in that people are just not going into the bank physically as much as they would have done previously.

Senator David Norris: We are not very welcome. We are deliberately made to feel unwelcome.

Senator Lisa Chambers: Perhaps that is the case with some banks. There has been a shift with younger generations using online banking predominantly, but that does not cater for all members of society. We are in a transition period where some people are feeling left behind. That is something we need to be very mindful of. Access to ATMs is really important. Many smaller towns and villages do not have many, if any, ATMs. That is also a big problem.

The Senator also raised the issue around carers, which is an important issue to keep to the fore in terms of our budget discussions. As I said earlier, we must look after the most vulnerable in society and those who are struggling the most. Carers save the State a huge amount of money by the work that they do in the home. They should not be disadvantaged in retirement. They should be looked after while they are doing that really important work for their loved ones. I agree with the Senator that there needs to be a special place in the budget for people doing that really important work.

Senator Ahearn raised the issue of the national development plan. As we know, the new, renewed and reviewed NDP will be launched and announced on Monday in Cork by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, alongside the Taoiseach. It is very welcome. It was a commitment in the programme for Government to review the NDP. I

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think we all agree that it needed to be reviewed. Many Members of the Houses have come with a shopping list, for want of a better phrase, of projects they want to see delivered. The Senator will be heartened to know that I have heard other colleagues mention the N24, that is, the Limerick to Waterford road, as being vitally important to the region. The Senator's request has been heard, because other colleagues are making the same request. The Senator also mentioned the M20, the Cork to Limerick road. I would not doubt the commitment and the ideological position of the Minister and the Taoiseach in terms of the need for those key pieces of infrastructure and roads. Roads are still important. I know that not all Members of the Government would have the same view of that. That is fine; it is a coalition Government. However, we still need to be able to get around the country, and roads will be a vital part of that. These are projects that have been long committed to. I hope to see that they will be delivered for the people of counties Tipperary, Limerick, Waterford, Cork and everyone in the region. Senator Higgins seconded Senator Ruane's Bill and spoke about the need for us, the Oireachtas, to see that we have our own house in order in terms of being inclusive for those with disabilities. Can we do better? Of course, we can always do better. She made reference to the sign language legislation that was passed, the Cathaoirleach's work on it and the need to keep track of it and make sure we are utilising it properly.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Ruane has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business, "That No. 12 be taken before No. 1." It was seconded by Senator Higgins. The Leader has indicated she is willing to accept the amendment. Is the amendment agreed? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

Companies (Emission Reporting) Bill 2021: First Stage

Senator Lynn Ruane: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to require companies to make annual public disclosures in relation to the greenhouse gas emissions caused by their activities, to cause decreases in such emissions over time, to amend the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 and the Companies Act 2014, and to provide for related matters.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Senator Lynn Ruane: Next Tuesday.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Tuesday, 5 October 2021.

Sitting suspended at 12.51 p.m. and resumed at 1.05 p.m.

Interim Report of the Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union: Motion

An Cathaoirleach: I congratulate Senator Chambers, who has chaired the Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union for some time, on the interim report. I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Thomas Byrne, back to the House. Having served in the Seanad for many years, I am sure he is delighted to be back. I congratulate him on chairing a session of the United Nations Security Council. We are proud that a former Member of the House has done so.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I move:

That Seanad Éireann shall take note of the Report of the Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union entitled ‘Interim Report on the Impacts of Brexit’, copies of which were laid before Seanad Éireann on 8th July, 2021.

I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, to the Chamber for the debate on the interim report of the Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, titled “Interim Report on the Impacts of Brexit”. I pay tribute to the committee secretariat, our clerk, Christy Haughton, all the members and all the witnesses who gave evidence to the committee culminating in the publication of our interim report just before the summer recess.

This is a welcome opportunity to engage with the Minister of State to discuss the findings of the report and, more important, the recommendations of the committee, on which we hope the Minister of State and Department will be in a position to follow through. The report and the work of the committee spanned a number of key areas. We decided as a committee what we felt were the key impacts of Brexit on our citizens, businesses and the island as a whole.

The committee discussed, took evidence on and debated trade flows and customs; infrastructure, particularly our ports and roads; the rule of origin issue as it affects exports; the protocol on Northern Ireland and Ireland; citizens’ rights in a post-Brexit world; mutual recognition of qualifications between Ireland and the UK; education and research; health issues, which have dominated some of the discussion on Brexit on the island, North and South; data flows, which may not at first have been considered one of the big issues but came to the fore when we realised the changes that came about as a result of Brexit; and future relations between the two islands, which we felt was one of the most important areas to focus on, including how we conduct business between Ireland and the UK following Brexit.

We kicked off by discussing trade flows. One of the key concerns running up to the Brexit deadline was how the import and export of goods would work at Dublin Port, Rosslare Europort and across the island. How would they impact on businesses and citizens and how would we deal with that? We made a number of recommendations. One was to streamline the process at our ports for exporters and importers. We noted the need for a one-stop shop. A key complaint we received from stakeholders was that their engagements with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the HSE and Revenue, were not conducive to efficiency at the ports. They had to go to a number of locations to get what they needed. We made a number of practical recommendations on documentation, including using electronic forms where possible, and to establish a one-stop shop to provide all the relevant information from the various Departments. The latter was a key recommendation.

When we discussed infrastructure, we concluded there was a need for increased investment

at our ports and the arteries leading thereto, including roads and rail infrastructure, to make life easier for the haulage sector and businesses engaged in the import and export of goods.

We discussed rule of origin issues. Two industries that presented to the committee were the whiskey and dairy sectors. I am sure the Minister of State will agree that milk produced in Northern Ireland and Ireland is of similar quality, produced in a similar fashion and often used in the same production lines. This posed a difficulty. A key ask of the committee was to look at how we could include goods produced in Northern Ireland and still have Irish origin and EU origin status. This presents a difficulty and is something we need to keep an eye on, particularly in future trade agreements between the European Union and third parties. We spent a considerable amount of time discussing the protocol on Northern Ireland and Ireland and obviously this continues to be an ongoing area of contention. We looked at how to resolve issues that we see coming down the tracks. I will get an opportunity to discuss other issues towards the end of the debate but the key ask around the protocol is that we know that there is a vote coming in Northern Ireland, a consent vote which was built into the withdrawal agreement. It is the strong view of the committee that the Government and the European Union should be proactive in preparing for that vote and not take for granted the outcome of it, and that we seek a key plan from the Minister and the Department in the coming months on how we are going to prepare the country for that vote.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Deputy Leader for chairing our Brexit committee. For all my colleagues, it has been a very useful and informative engagement. I thank the Minister and the Department officials for their work.

One issue we all felt was important, and I am sure the Minister will appreciate it, is that in the past on the fringes of EU summits, it was always possible for Irish Ministers and UK Ministers to engage but that opportunity is no longer there. It is really important that those links, whereby there is engagement not just between Dublin and London but between Dublin and Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh, continue.

The Chair of our committee outlined some of the issues we covered, including the rules of origin issue. There is one other issue, which is very important. An issue we need to address is around flour and the importance of trying to produce flour in this country rather than having to rely on its importation.

I want to focus on two areas. One area is around the data adequacy decisions. When I started talking about it, a few eyes glazed over, but the question of data transfer is hugely important. As Members know, the EU has agreed that the data transfer regime with the UK currently is adequate and that it is subject, under the normal course of events, to review in a couple of years. There is, however, a serious problem. The UK Government yesterday decided to publish a consultation document with regard to its own data protection laws. If it moves significantly away from the GDPR regime with which we are familiar, then that will cause a significant problem. If the legislation the UK Government brings forward to replace GDPR is seen as not being compatible with GDPR, then the European Commission will have no option but to suspend or terminate the adequacy decision concerning data flows into the UK from the European Union. That has very serious consequences.

People might think it only affects big multinational companies, but it could affect a small business in Monaghan whose payroll is done in Armagh. There will be obligations placed on those companies. The UK Government is conducting its consultation at present. For a variety

of reasons around the importance of and believing in a citizen's right to data privacy, I would hope that the UK does not make significant changes in that area. However, it has very significant consequences for business here. When asked to cost it, the Data Protection Commissioner informed our committee that it could cost up to €1 billion in additional costs for businesses in this country if there is not a data adequacy decision concerning the flows from the UK.

The other issue I will briefly mention is Rosslare. We engaged with the ports and I am glad to say Rosslare is booming. There are far more direct sailings, although the concentration has been on freight. We are going to look at attracting many more tourists through Rosslare, hopefully from next year. One issue of concern is that that has obviously required additional staffing in Rosslare. An issue for the Garda is that the Wexford division is required to provide the staffing in Rosslare. Given the added importance of Rosslare, the fact we are going to have phytosanitary inspections and so on, we must ensure we have an adequate number of staff at our ports and airports, but particularly in Rosslare given how rapidly the port is growing.

Senator Tim Lombard: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber to discuss the important issue of the Brexit report that has been published. I compliment the Chairperson who has done a fantastic job in combining all these key issues regarding Brexit. It is a good work in progress. The Brexit report is a good starting base to have a detailed discussion about core areas affected by Brexit.

I will stick to the agricultural industry and how it is going to be significantly affected. There are 59 dairy milk processing plants on this island. It is an industry worth literally €17.5 billion to our economy. It will affect every single dairy farmer and every community if we do not get the issue of origin of product sorted. Some 40% of milk is coming from the North to the South to be processed. These are huge issues for our communities and our manufacturing industries. How we deal with that origin issue is really important. It is probably one of the most significant issues, not alone for rural Ireland but for our economy itself.

Another key issue is that we need veterinary certificates to be signed. At the moment, roughly 100 veterinarians graduate each year from our veterinary college. We have a huge issue around a shortage of veterinarians on farms because of the lack of veterinarians in the country. Now veterinarians are being sucked out of practice and are doing departmental work because of Brexit. That will have a potential knock on effect on services on the ground. We will have to look at how those veterinary certificates are being worked on and who signs them. With a limited number of graduates coming through, we cannot have a situation where veterinarians are literally taken away from the farm gate to do this work.

The Chairperson mentioned the whiskey industry, which is a really significant industry for Ireland, with massive potential to grow. Again, however, the all-Ireland origin issue is a massive one for us. I mentioned it on the first day the committee met. I still believe it is one of the most important industries in regard to growth and we need to protect it. We need to protect the all-Ireland nature of it. That is going to be a significant challenge with Brexit.

My final point is our tourism industry. We were moving to an all-Ireland tourism model. Brexit has damaged relations, without a shadow of a doubt. A renewed effort is required to make sure we can build on that all-Ireland tourism model because that is a key driver for our economy and for our society. The work the committee has done is a great start but significant engagement is required to keep it going.

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Senator Vincent P. Martin: I will make two points and try not to repeat those already made. I commend our Chair who chaired the committee most ably, inclusively and professionally. This was not about party politics. I hope communities, especially in the North, realise that this was a most sincere, professional attempt on our behalf to try to move things forward.

Unionists have genuine concerns. From my contacts and from those of other public representatives' contacts, I do not see the amplification of those concerns. There is a great opportunity here. Some experts, who have published, have said there are benefits flowing from this.

In my humble opinion, those concerns are driven by the cohort of party politics as distinct from the business sector and the people on the ground. Nevertheless, they exist, and the challenge we face is to assuage and allay unionist fears. No one on the committee set out to undermine unionism and fragment it, but it thinks otherwise. We have a job of work to do to convince them of that.

The second point I will make is covered well in the recommendations of the report. We have two recommendations. One relates to the democratic deficit which now exists in Northern Ireland. I quoted from a statement in the committee but, for the Minister of State's sake and for the record of the House, I will repeat it. It was a statement by the former leader of unionism, now a member of the Conservative and Unionist Party, Lord David Trimble. His view of the protocol, with which I do not agree, is as follows:

The laws that will apply to the economy, the environment, agriculture, workers rights, and regulations covering everything from building standards to use of weedkillers, no longer will be made at our parliament in Westminster or the local Assembly in Belfast. They will instead be determined by a foreign authority in Brussels.

I happen to disagree with him, but he has a point and I agree with some of what he is saying. That democratic deficit does now exist. I have mentioned this to the Cathaoirleach in his constitutional office. We are pushing an open door. The Cathaoirleach also recognises that a segment of the population of the island that has never been so close to Europe has no representation and no MEPs. They are always afforded a very warm welcome when they come here but those visits are not made on a formal, structured basis. In the long term, that might require constitutional reform, but in the short term, if these are our fellow islanders, their voices and concerns must be heard. This should not be done through committees with good intentions whose remits encompass Europe; they should be there in their own right. It is their voice. If no one else will give them a direct line, their fellow Irish people in the Republic of Ireland have to leave the door open to them and be proactive in giving them a formal voice. Two of the recommendations in this detailed report, recommendations 31 and 32, which I am sure the Minister of State has read, cover this issue. It was a matter of serious concern for the committee.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. Tá súil agam go bhfuil an tuairisc seo agus obair an choiste ina chuidiú dó agus é i mbun a chuid oibre, ní hamháin i dtaca leis an mBreatimeacht ach i dtaca le cúrsaí níos leithne arís.

I join with colleagues in thanking our Chair and acknowledging her work in bringing together such a comprehensive and representative body of groups and organisations, not least in the context of Covid and all of the difficulties and challenges that represented for her and the secretariat. I am very conscious of, and thankful for, their hard work in ensuring that we got to

this point, when the report is before us.

I will make a couple of general points. The report speaks for itself. Colleagues have also made general points so I do not need to rehearse them. It is always important in discussions such as this to remind ourselves that there is no such thing as a good Brexit, that the people of the North rejected it and that the agreed protocol is in place to offset the negatives that have been forced upon us as a result of Brexit. It is always important to remember that as we navigate our work.

While I have nothing but the fullest respect for Senator Martin in respect of what he brings to this Chamber and, indeed, this debate, I speak to people from a unionist background all of the time who were opposed to Brexit and voted against it and who are now in favour of the protocol and acknowledge the protections and mitigations it offers to them and their communities, businesses or whatever it might be. What we hear on the airwaves or on social media is not always reflective of the truth. Anyone who took the opportunity to go around the Balmoral Show last week would have heard from farmers from all traditions who were deeply concerned at the rhetoric from the British Government in respect of Article 16 and the protocol. These farmers acknowledge the significance and importance of the protocol in protecting themselves and our all-island economy.

I will make a few points on the issue of trade and the economy. I spoke about this the other day. The figures published by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, for June show that, over the first six months of 2020, North to South trade increased by 78%, from €998 million to €1.77 billion, in comparison with the same period in 2020. South to North trade has increased by 43%, increasing from €1.1 billion to €1.576 billion. That is why we need to ensure the protocol is front and centre in protecting people. In addition to the macroeconomic issues, one of the key intentions of the committee was to ensure that citizens' voices were heard and that the issues people faced when going about their everyday lives were recognised because, unfortunately, Brexit permeates all aspects of our lives. There is no part of our lives it has not impacted upon.

Senator Currie and I tabled a Commencement matter this morning with regard to the EU digital certificate. By the way, I welcome the announcement by the Government. It is a positive and important move to allow people in the North to apply for the EU digital certificate. There were a few initial teething problems, but that was an issue for the Commencement matter. What is important is that people have retained an EU entitlement that they would have lost as a result of Brexit. I believe the committee would agree that it is important that, where the Government has the opportunity to ensure that such entitlements are upheld, it takes a proactive and effective approach to doing so. That also goes for Senator Martin's points regarding our representation and ensuring that our voices are heard at an EU level.

Senator Mark Wall: I too welcome the Minister of State to the House. I join with colleagues in thanking our Chair, Senator Chambers, for her inclusiveness, for what she has done in bringing us all together and for arranging for the number of witnesses we saw in respect of this very important report to appear. We are here today to discuss the interim part of that particular report.

A number of colleagues mentioned investment in ports and staffing levels. My colleague, Senator Malcolm Byrne, has been mentioning Rosslare at every meeting we have had. I had the privilege of sitting down with Deputy Howlin of my own party to discuss Rosslare in the last week. He agrees with the sentiment Senator Malcolm Byrne has expressed today. We need

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investment in our ports. We also need to look at staffing, particularly with regard to the policing and Garda element Senator Malcolm Byrne raised today.

I could not agree more with the Cathaoirleach about preparing for a protocol vote. It would be very interesting to hear what the Department is doing in that regard in the Minister of State's reply. The one-stop shop for imports proposed in the report is something we heard suggested by an awful lot of witnesses, particularly those involved in the transport sector. I am still getting reports of problems. Even today, I heard of an issue with goods coming into the country. These still have not been ironed out. We still do not have a one-stop shop. Again, I would be interested to hear the plans of the Minister of State and his Department as to how we can do that. It is very achievable and, in fairness, people are working towards it but we need to get to it a little bit quicker than we are, given where we now stand.

We were to talk about the cross-border health directive this morning but, unfortunately, due to technical difficulties, we were unable to go ahead with that particular meeting. This is something I have raised previously. I raised it with the Minister of State's colleague, the Minister for Defence, earlier in the week in the context of the benefits it provides for PDFORRA members through the PDFORRA medical assistance scheme, PMAS, that body administers. I understand that the current scheme is due to end at the end of December. Our colleagues in Northern Ireland have extended the equivalent scheme to July of next year, providing a further six months. This is causing a lot of worry for those benefiting from PMAS. If I may just concentrate on our Defence Forces, the scheme has brought tremendous benefits for those who need medical care. As the Minister of State knows, this care can extend the lives and military careers of members of our Defence Forces and is badly needed. I ask the Minister of State to consider that matter. I have raised it with the Minister for Health and the Minister for Defence. Perhaps the Minister of State can also comment on the matter.

I will raise two final issues. The first relates to exports. The Minister of State will be aware that, once again, the UK has put back its declarations until 1 January or even into the first couple of months of the new year. In conversations we had with a number of witnesses, we heard that they were worried about our exports to the UK. I ask the Minister of State to comment on where we are with that. I know a significant amount of work has been done in that regard, but it is a worry for many exporters. In recent days, Marks and Spencer has commented on the problems it is experiencing with goods coming in and going out. It is an important topic for which we have to be prepared.

On the issue of tourism, my colleague raised a very important matter. It is very important that we consider tourism on an all-island basis. It is essential for this country that we portray ourselves on an all-island basis. That is the way it should be done. It goes to the heart of what the committee is all about. I look forward to the comments of the Minister of State.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I compliment Senator Chambers and the committee. They have been working on the report in a very productive and united manner. I pay tribute to the Minister of State on his work and, of course, that of the Taoiseach. All Senators know the difficulties and troubles that have been created for Irish farms and agribusinesses, as well as for many other sectors but we should not forget that Ireland has done very well out of the Brexit fund. The fund of €1 billion is really important for the future of those businesses and the agri-sector in terms of the supports to get them through this.

Like other speakers, I wish to again encourage businesspeople and others North of the

Border who know the reality of what needs to happen here to accept that and move forward. The hand of friendship is extended to assist unionists, in particular, because they have issues with this. I have previously put on the record of the House the need to assist and support those people because we have to move forward as an island in this regard.

Brexit has been an absolute disaster. We have to reconsider matters in the context of the fear that still exists in the agri-sector, in particular. In my county and the adjoining counties of Galway and Mayo, many family agrifood businesses have been set up in recent years, each providing ten, 15, 20 or 30 jobs. Those businesses will acknowledge the support of the Government and the Brexit fund but the reality is that they are in constant fear and always looking over their shoulder to see where this will go. We are by no means out of the woods yet in terms of there being a smooth path forward. We do not have that. There is a significant amount of work to be done.

That said, an extraordinary amount of work is being done in the Seanad by the committee that is dealing with it and its Chairman. Much of the work is being done behind the scenes, which is very important in the context of this issue. Kite-flying or wild statements on this matter are not helpful in any way. We must all work closely together as politicians in the South to ensure we bring people in the North with us on this matter because it is a massive threat to the whole economy, North and South. That said, the procedures on which we are currently engaged and the fact we have the Brexit fund and are working together as a group are very clear statements that we can make progress and move in the right direction.

Let there be no doubt in anybody's mind that the threat still exists. It affects rural and urban Ireland, but in my county, the west midlands and the Border counties, the fear is always there in the farming and small business sectors. There is no doubt that Brexit has created difficulties for some of those businesses. They appreciate the way we are working here. That is the message I get at my constituency clinics, particularly from small businesses. They accept that the matter is being well handled South of the Border.

I again make the point that the hand of friendship has been extended to people North of the Border, particularly the unionist population which has difficulties with this. Unionist businesspeople always did business with people from the South of Ireland. Whether it was farming business, enterprise or whatever, they always did it and they know the realities of business. It might not take too much to bring them back to reality on this issue. Of course, the British Government is a major difficulty in all of this, as Members are aware.

Senator Emer Currie: I welcome the Minister. I say "Well done" to the Chairman of the committee on the report. I am only at page 31 but I am making my way through it.

There is no such thing as a good Brexit. It has forced us to make decisions we did not want to make. We have had to work to protect our island from a hard border and we are dealing with the fallout of Brexit every day. The issues relating to Brexit are not going away but what strikes me about the report is the hunger within it. I know from my experience as a member of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement that there is a significant amount of hunger among civic community groups, voluntary groups and business groups for engagement because they recognise the challenges that exist.

It is such a pity that, exactly at the time we need to be leaning in to North-South co-operation, others are leaning out. That makes me focus on parts of the Good Friday Agreement that

have not been implemented. I refer to the North-South consultative forum. If that forum were in being, we would be in a much better position in terms of dealing with the resilience, communication and connections needed in order to come up with practical solutions. It would also provide an opportunity to get a sense of what is happening on the ground instead of the political narrative that is constantly pushed. Dual market access is a major opportunity for the North. It is an opportunity for people to move away from identity politics and towards prosperity politics, which is exactly what the region needs. What is the view of the Minister of State on the North-South consultative forum? I know North-South co-operation is currently very difficult, but what can we do to bring together the people who need to be brought together? I make those remarks in the context of east-west relations as well. All Senators are saying that more connections are needed.

I am proud to be Chairman of the British-Irish Parliamentary Association, BIPA, committee on sovereign affairs. We are working on a report in respect of strengthening or consolidating the British-Irish relationship. I would welcome the views of the Minister of State on the North-South consultative forum. That impacts things like tourism, Waterways Ireland and the all-island economy. The rules of origin are so important. I know a fix is seen as problematic but we have to keep this on the table because protecting an all-Ireland supply chain is fundamental to where we wish to go with the Good Friday Agreement. It is important in the context of making sure that we are able to retain mixed-origin goods in future trade agreements. The impact that can have on goods such as dairy and whiskey is significant. The Minister of State referred to mitigation measures but, fundamentally, this is something we need to push to try to find a solution.

I refer to the concerns raised in the document in respect of citizens' rights and the concern of the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for the Executive Office regarding the decision of the UK not to incorporate the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights into domestic law and the fact that the UK Government is undertaking a review of the Human Rights Act. The latter is also something that we have to keep an eye on. I say that knowing there are proposals on the table relating to legacy that, for us, completely undermine international law and the European Convention on Human Rights. We need to be very wary of potential erosion of the rights of citizens.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach as an bhfáilte a chur sé romham filleadh ar an seomra álainn seo, seomra inar shuigh mé ar feadh cúig bliana, idir 2011 agus 2016. Tá áthas orm a bheith ar ais leis an Seanadóir Daly agus é ina Chathaoirleach. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an roghchoiste maidir leis an mBreathimeacht. Tá obair an-tábhachtach déanta ag na comhaltaí go léir faoi chathaoirleacht an tSeanadóira Chambers. Is obair í atá an-tábhachtach chun cur in iúl do gach duine go bhfuil fadhbanna fós ann; go bhfuilimid sa Teach agus san Oireachtas uile ag lorg réitigh ar na fadhbanna sin agus, mar a dúirt an Seanadóir Murphy, go bhfuilimid ag cur lámh shíochána amach do gach cearn de Thuaisceart na hÉireann.

I am grateful for the invitation to return to the Seanad today and for your kind words earlier, a Chathaoirligh. I was very glad to be a Member of the Seanad for five years. I believe this is my first time back in the Chamber since I left the Seanad, although I have addressed the Seanad previously in the Dáil Chamber.

I thank the Chairperson of the select committee, Senator Chambers, and members of the select committee for the important work that has been done. When I was a Member of the Se-

anad, I always felt that it was a real gap that select committees were not used. It was only after my term that select committees started to be used on a thematic basis. Certainly, I believe they should be used more in the Seanad. That is important because sometimes they provide a different reflection given that in the joint committees, perhaps, Members of the Dáil are more to the fore, not in all cases but by the very nature of democratic representation.

The Seanad select committee provided an important platform for businesses, community groups and civil society groups when appearing before it. I am aware that a final report will be issued. The Brexit response has required a massive, collective, change-management exercise across the Government, the Oireachtas, business and civil society. I emphasise the word “collective”. The cross-party approach on Brexit in this Chamber and in the Dáil has been of great importance. When we go to the European Union and get unity from all the member states, it is easy to ask for and expect that unity when they see that the political system here is united on the issue of Brexit. That is welcome and I thank the Opposition and Government members for it. It cannot be underestimated. That has held for the last number of years and, unquestionably, it has been very much in the national interest.

It is nine months from the end of the Brexit transition period, but it still feels like a transition. The British withdrawal from the Single Market and the customs union, two big mistakes, in my opinion, which I believe it is seeing now, has resulted in changes to our imports and exports. It has had negative effects in this country and we can see the disastrous effects in Great Britain. The way in which we move goods on and off the island has changed. We are monitoring trends closely and are cautious at this stage about long-term conclusions because the effects of Covid and the Brexit transition still exist. However, there are a number of issues in the report and I will try to address them and the issues raised today.

Regarding improvements to flows in our ports, some improvements have been made. For example, a dedicated communications interface between traders’ customs systems and the Revenue Commissioners roll-on roll-off system is now in place. Further improvements are also in train. Relevant agencies are working together to streamline processes and reduce the administrative burden for traders as much as possible, but we have to meet our obligations under EU law. The change here is that Britain has left the Single Market. It has built these barriers. We will work as hard as we can to ease the requirements, but the fact is that this is the result of Brexit. This is the Single Market that Margaret Thatcher and others, including Charles Haughey, put together. They eliminated those barriers. By leaving the Single Market, Britain has raised them again. There will be UK import controls as well, which will bring more challenges for our businesses. We have been expecting them for some time but Britain keeps postponing them. These will be a problem for food businesses in particular. We are investing substantially in additional State capacity to meet certification needs, as well as providing guidance, advice and support for exporters.

Of course, it is not just business that is affected by the withdrawal of the UK. The report recognises the impact it has had on individual citizens in areas such as health, education and data flows. There have been positive developments in these areas, such as the EU adequacy decisions, but we must continue to monitor the issue closely. In my opinion, the biggest change and difficulty has been the rules of origin. A number of Senators mentioned that. The Taoiseach, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, and I have raised this at the highest level and we will continue to do so. It is having a massively detrimental impact on business, so we continue to work on it.

Senator Malcolm Byrne referred to Rosslare Europort. There has been work done in that regard. I visited Rosslare Europort and a lot of work has been carried out there. Unfortunately, Brexit has caused this problem. Space is limited there, but the Government is keeping everything under review. Some 1,500 staff have been engaged there since the start of the year.

The issue of tourism is very important. It has been mentioned that it must be done on an all-Ireland basis. Tourism Ireland is an all-Ireland, cross-Border body. We will continue to see that when it promotes Ireland for tourism, it is the island of Ireland it is promoting. That has to continue.

Senators Martin, Murphy and Ó Donnghaile referred to cross-community relations. That is very important. It is important that a strong message is conveyed from this Chamber and the Oireachtas that the concerns of unionists are understood and that the protocol, in particular, is not a threat to anybody's identity. It simply cannot affect the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Whether one is a nationalist or a unionist, one probably feels more protected within the European Union. If one is somebody who does not want to leave the European Union, one is happier there. However, even from a unionist point of view, one will be more closely integrated with everybody within the European Union. Also, we cannot exaggerate the effects. There are supermarkets there that have not featured in the newspapers and that have had no problems. Senator Ó Donnghaile lives in Belfast. I visited supermarkets on a fact-finding mission and there was plenty of food and no issues. Some supermarkets are substituting as well. We also know that Northern Ireland has some of the largest pig processing factories, probably in the world. That got lost during the summer. The protocol is a huge opportunity for them. We must continue to remind people that Northern Ireland is open for business. One of the difficulties with all the uncertainty coming from London is that if a business is planning to invest in Northern Ireland it does not know what is happening. We have the protocol and we have to bring certainty to it. We must work with it.

Engagement in Northern Ireland is important. It was good and welcome that Vice President Šefčovič visited and spent two full days there, which is longer than most Ministers will spend on engagements in another country. It was two full days of listening to communities. That was important, and they felt they were being listened to as well. MEPs will continue that. We will encourage that. I want MEPs to do it, and not just our MEPs but also MEPs from across Europe. Earlier this year, I had the Portuguese Minister, who holds the Presidency of the Council, engage with civil society in Northern Ireland and I am hoping to do that with the Slovenian Presidency as well. That will be welcome from the Council point of view. The Senator mentioned the North-South consultative forum and civil society. That would be good and important. We have already started that in terms of listening to civil society in Northern Ireland and on our side in the Council of Ministers and I want to see how we can develop that further. It is about people being listened to and giving their ideas.

On the health issue, that scheme is there and the plan is to put it on a permanent legislative basis. That will continue but, again, it is a problem because of Brexit. That is the truth. It is a European directive that gave rights to us and to citizens in Northern Ireland and in Newcastle, but it is gone because of this decision. We see roaming charges back in the UK. That is a tragedy. It was all too predictable. We must keep reminding people of the advantages of the protocol. We are certainly not out of the woods with regard to lorry drivers or the supply issues that Britain is facing because this is an island nation. I will not count my chickens too quickly, but the truth is that we have not had the same disruption as Great Britain has had. That is because of our membership of the European Union and the stability it gives. One lorry driver quoted in the

Financial Times said that he feels European when he comes to the Netherlands and to Ireland, but that he does not have the same feeling in Britain.

We are all one. When it comes to referendums and when parties oppose the European Union I always say that there is give and take. The take we all get from working together is far greater than what we all give individually. We need to remember that about our membership of the European Union. We have to be passionate about that membership. We are approaching the 50th anniversary of accession. We joined the EEC in 1973. There are many events happening and I think the first Seanad debate will probably be sooner than that. It will be worth recalling that sometime early next year because the Taoiseach at the time signed the accession treaty in February 1972. There will be one country not the table next year because it will be Ireland and Denmark remembering that event, rather than Ireland, Denmark and the UK. That will be a pity. We have to be passionate about the benefits of this, as given to us, and we need to keep reminding people that we cannot take these things for granted. That sense of being European is a major advantage to us.

I have much more to say but I am running out of time. I have tried to answer most of the questions put forward. I thank Senators for the calm nature of this debate and for the process in which they have engaged. They have also been firm that there are agreements between the EU and the United Kingdom; they have to stick to their agreements, as we do. That is to everybody's benefit. There is major work under way between the EU and the UK to try to make sure the protocol will operate in the most efficient way possible. It will still be there but it will work efficiently so we can ensure the problems we see in Britain do not transfer to Northern Ireland.

I welcome the ongoing work. I hope it will result in what we need most - certainty. We can then have discussions on other issues and start moving on. We will see what the next generation in the UK brings to the table in terms of where it sees its destiny. I certainly hope at some point in the future that destiny will return that country and, indeed, the North of Ireland to the EU, which has proven to be the greatest peace process in the history of the world and which was an inspiration for the peace process in Northern Ireland. It is our complete objective to sustain and maintain that and to bring economic prosperity North and South.

Senator Lisa Chambers: We all concur with the hope that some day we might see the UK return and see the entire island be a part of the EU. The Minister of State will have taken from all the contributions during the debate that Brexit is still very much a live issue. If it was not for the pandemic, we probably would have had greater discussions on the impact of Brexit throughout the country. He rightly pointed out that one of the key objectives of our committee was to give a platform to those businesses, citizens and communities affected by Brexit that wanted to have their voices heard to ensure the Oireachtas and the Government took on board their views and experiences.

One of the issues I did not get to a chance to mention in my opening remarks was that around the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland. As a committee, we are very keen to see that addressed in any meaningful way we can to make sure the voices of Irish citizens, and people in the North who feel very much part of the EU and want to remain part of it, are heard. As Senator Ó Donnghaile rightly pointed out, Northern Ireland rejected Brexit and yet it now finds itself outside the EU, which is not a satisfactory position for many people and citizens in the North. We want to see that addressed through all the channels open to the Government.

The Minister of State mentioned Vice President Šefčovič, who will be before our committee

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in the coming weeks. That is something we are very much looking forward to. Commissioner McGuinness and Congressman Richard Neal have also appeared before the committee. We were very heartened to have Congressman Neal at our opening meeting to reiterate the support of the United States for Ireland's position of protecting the Good Friday Agreement and driving home the message to the UK that there will not be a trade deal if it jeopardises that agreement or seeks to undermine it in any way. The Seanad Brexit committee has been an important platform for Ireland and the Oireachtas to get those views heard and aired and to give us an opportunity to drive home our message that, as the Minister of State said, we are committed members of the EU, which is a club with a very proud history and Ireland is very proud to be a member of it.

As public representatives, it is important we remind the public of the very good work the EU has done for Ireland, as the Minister of State vitally pointed out. Brexit has done that for us in that it has shown citizens the benefits of membership of the EU. We see certain events happening across the water that remind people of what happens when you step out of the Single Market and the customs union. They were designed for a very good reason and with very good benefits for members. It is unfortunate that things have transpired in the way they have.

We will continue our work over the coming weeks and months, with the intention of producing our final report at the end of the year. We will then have either the Minister of State or the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, before the Seanad again to hear about our final report. We will then follow up with the Minister of State, as he no doubt knows, and the Department on our recommendations and plans for implementation. The committee looks forward to engaging with the Minister of State in seeing those recommendations implemented.

I thank the Minister of State for his attendance. Once again, I thank our members, witnesses and the committee secretariat for their work in putting this report together. I thank the Cathaoirleach for his leniency in allowing me a few extra minutes for my remarks.

Question put and agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again? Is it 2.30 p.m. next Tuesday?

Senator Lisa Chambers: Yes.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

The Seanad adjourned at 1.55 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 5 October 2021.