



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 19 Deireadh Fómhair 2021

Tuesday, 19 October 2021

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the scoliosis treatment waiting lists for children.

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

The need for the Minister of State with responsibility for public health, well-being and national drugs strategy to make a statement on the apportionment of funding to drugs and alcohol task forces from the drugs strategy funding announced in budget 2022.

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

The need for the Minister for Foreign Affairs to make a statement on the continuing incarceration of Julian Assange.

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on plans to ensure water supplies are reliable and safe, particularly in light of issues at the Ballymore Eustace plant.

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

The need for the Minister for Education to make a statement on the lack of parity between the use of traditional and simplified Chinese characters in leaving certificate Mandarin classes.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the timeline for the appointment of a design team for the west wing critical care unit of the Rotunda Hospital, Parnell Square.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the current Covid-19 vaccine uptake and whether continuing with the requirement to show a digital Covid certificate would assist in encouraging further take up of the vaccine.

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to broaden the commercial to residential planning exemption to include former pubs.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Boyhan, Seery Kearney, Gavan and O’Loughlin and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Frankie Feighan, for coming to the House.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Health Services

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, and welcome him back to the Seanad. This issue relates to the Scoliosis Advocacy Network. I am not sure if the Minister of State has been briefed on this issue, but its representative appeared last week on “Today with Claire Byrne” on RTÉ. One of the reasons I am following up on this is that the Scoliosis Advocacy Network has been in touch with me, as it has been in touch with many other Members. The network’s concern is what it describes as children languishing on waiting lists to have their medical needs and surgery addressed.

On “Today with Claire Byrne”, the cofounder of the Scoliosis Advocacy Network, Ms Clare Cahill, said there had been no engagement with the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, despite repeated requests. That surprised me. I have a lot of time for the Minister; he is most engaging. Any time I have had any reason to deal with him on any matter he has been prompt and responsive. That is on the record and I have checked it again. This story was covered on RTÉ radio. I checked again this morning just to be sure. The network has said it is a concern and I would like some clarification on that assertion.

The network has cited the last-minute cancellation of surgery, as well as the experience that some children have had of surgery being cancelled; many of them have had it cancelled three times. That is clearly unacceptable. We know that the Ombudsman for Children has highlighted access to scoliosis care for children and has spoken about it as being a fundamental children’s right. I agree with him.

The HSE promised it would buy surgeries and provide health services through the private health system, in a similar manner to the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF. I now understand this is not available for those with very complex needs, and I can understand that. That is fair and reasonable.

Two issues stood out in RTÉ’s coverage of this issue. The Taoiseach has said that the de-

lays in treatment are not because of the lack of resources, but rather are the result of a systemic failure. He said he has spoken to the Minister for Health about these matters. The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Leo Varadkar, said the Government severely regrets that children and their families are experiencing long waiting times for scoliosis treatment and that he is seriously concerned about it. I think that is fair comment.

I had hoped to ask the Minister for Health about this. There are now 172 children waiting for scoliosis treatment, many of whom are, as their parents have described, in agony. They have specific needs and the longer interventions are delayed, the more impact there will be on them. It is a scandal. Health is an important issue. It is something that has to be addressed, in particular where children are concerned.

I am not sure if the Minister of State is in a position to answer my question, but I intended to ask the Minister for Health to explain why there is such a delay in surgery and what the systemic failure is that the Taoiseach is on the record as saying exists regarding scoliosis treatment. In a nutshell, I want the Minister of State, if he can, to set out a timeline for how these children will be treated and, more importantly, an absolute commitment that the Minister and Department of Health will engage in a meaningful way with the Scoliosis Advocacy Network.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Senator for raising this very important issue. On behalf of the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, I welcome the opportunity to address the House.

I sincerely regret that children can experience a long waiting time for scoliosis treatment and I remain conscious of the burden this places on them and their families. The priority of the Minister for Health and the Government is to improve waiting times for all patients accessing hospital treatment, and reducing paediatric waiting lists for orthopaedic procedures remains a priority within that. The Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, are working on a multi-annual waiting list plan to address waiting lists and bring them in line with Sláintecare targets over the coming years. This process will be overseen by a ministerial task force, chaired by the Secretary General of the Department and including representatives from the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund. It will take the learnings from the achievements of the vaccine task force to inform the plan.

To support the work of the task force, an additional €250 million is being provided in budget 2022 to improve access to care across the health system. It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the past 19 months as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic and, more recently, as a result of the ransomware attack. The cyberattack in May 2021 in particular caused significant disruption to the orthopaedic service and all services across the Children's Health Ireland, CHI, hospital group. Without access to a patient's full history and previous diagnostic investigations, it was not considered safe to proceed without all electronic support systems in place. This impacted patients with complex needs in particular and restricted the patient cohort that could safely proceed without surgery during this time. Most systems are now back up and running across CHI sites, but backloading of information is ongoing, and this continues to have an impact on waiting lists and the numbers of surgeries completed.

Despite the impact of the pandemic and the cyberattack, Children's Health Ireland advises that as of the end of September 2021, 266 spinal surgeries had been carried out, which is an increase of 41 compared with the same period last year. CHI has remained committed to in-

creasing activity levels and examining innovative measures to improve access to all specialties. For example, additional theatre sessions are being held in Cappagh National Orthopaedic Hospital for non-complex, age-appropriate orthopaedic patients. CHI also continues to develop the advanced clinical triage model in Citywest. Active clinical triage is a system which has been adapted for use within the paediatric orthopaedic unit at CHI Crumlin. Its purpose is to reduce the overall orthopaedic outpatient waiting list, starting with the longest waiting clinically appropriate referrals.

A new orthopaedic consultant with a specialist interest in neuromuscular conditions started in Temple Street in September, which should also enable the use of additional theatre capacity and support additional capacity as part of the Cappagh kids programme. Officials in the Department of Health remain in regular contact with CHI regarding scoliosis services, and CHI has advised that all patients with a diagnosis of scoliosis require a preoperative work-up prior to spinal surgery, including multiple diagnostic investigations and a review by a multidisciplinary team. The plan of care, which is implemented for each patient, is tailored to best meet a patient's clinical requirements. It is the responsibility of the treating consultant to prioritise patients clinically on the waiting list for surgery.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I am very disappointed. I do not know who prepared the Minister of State's response. This matter was specifically about scoliosis. This was not about the National Treatment Purchase Fund or waiting lists generally. This was a very focused Commencement matter about 170 children with scoliosis. It was as a result of an episode of "Today with Claire Byrne" on RTÉ last week and correspondence that had been sent to the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister for Health and the leader of the Labour Party, Deputy Kelly. There is no comfort in the Minister of State's reply. What do I say when I pick up the phone in ten minutes' time to speak to the Scoliosis Advocacy Network, whose members asked me to make a case for them here today?

The reply does not talk about the systemic failure the Taoiseach spoke about and is on the record as having spoken about. It does not talk about the severe regrets expressed by the Tánaiste or children's experiences of long waiting lists or the need to remain conscious of the burdens that are placed on the families concerned. None of that is addressed in the Minister of State's response. I respect the Minister of State. He has a task to do and he is delivering the substance of this message on behalf of the Department but I ask him to go back to it and say this is urgent. It relates specifically to the 172 children who want to know when they are having their treatment. They do not want to hear, for the fourth time, that their treatment has been deferred. I thank the Minister of State for giving the Department's response but I respectfully ask him to go back to the Department and say he is not happy with it. It is not comprehensive and it does not give comfort to the children and families involved.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Again, I thank to Senator for raising this issue. I am acutely aware of the distress and inconvenience caused to patients and their families when urgent care is delayed. Improving waiting times for hospital appointments and procedures is a priority. I will relay the Senator's concerns and annoyance to the Minister and the Department.

It is recognised that waiting times for all scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the past 19 months as a direct result of Covid-19. There have been some positive aspects but the needs of the 172 young children need to be addressed as quickly as possible. I hope my officials in the Department will work closely with Children's Health Ireland and the wider HSE to try to improve access to this treatment.

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The Senator asked for a commitment to a timeline. I cannot give him one. However, I thank him for raising this difficult and important issue. I will relay his views to the Department and try to get him a response as quickly as possible.

Departmental Funding

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I thank the Minister of State, as always. I really appreciate his great commitment to us in the Seanad.

I really welcomed the announcement in the budget of an additional €6 million for the Minister of State's Department. I have submitted this matter because we really need to understand how much of the funding is being apportioned to the drugs and alcohol task forces under the drugs strategy. The Minister of State is no doubt aware of the views of the chairs of the drugs and alcohol task forces around Dublin. I am privileged to be the chair of the Dublin 12 drugs and alcohol task force. For much of my contribution, I will use its words. The drugs initiative budget was cut every year between 2008 and 2014, resulting in an overall cut of 35% to key services responding to the drug problem on the ground. There has been little or no attempt to restore the pre-recession budgets and no increase in the allocation between 2014 and 2018. In 2019, there was an additional €20,000 per drugs task force but half of that was clawed back in 2020. In 2021, a need for an increase in drugs and alcohol task force budgets was anticipated. There has been a failure year on year, which is frustrating and demoralising for those working on the ground. The drugs problem has become more widespread. It is complex and deep rooted. Each community has its own problems to deal with and its own needs to be met. Therefore, communities need discretion to model their actions and respond at local level.

We have a commitment in the programme for Government. It states:

The Drug and Alcohol Task Forces play a key role in implementing this strategy and increasing access at local level to harm reduction initiatives. We will examine how we can continue to support it in identifying local need in communities, and support targeted initiatives addressing drug and alcohol misuse.

To date, there has not been great progress in supporting the increase in the demand for those services, although I acknowledge the Minister of State's absolute commitment and support. I acknowledge also that he recently met representatives of each of the drugs task forces and set out the six strategic areas on which he is going to work with them. However, the matter highlighted in the budget submission of the drugs and alcohol task forces is that, although there is inflation, the budget has not matched it.

There is an increase in demand, the tsunami expected after Covid. We need an increase. There is an increase in the number of people with a dual diagnosis to which we need to be able to respond. There is no discretion for design and delivery in the scope of the funding available to services. We need to build back better. The pandemic response needs to be phased, targeted and very community focused and community-based because the culture and context is unique to each task force. I see this even with our task force and the individual areas within Dublin 12. I would welcome the Minister of State's comments on how much of this budget is being allocated to task forces. It would be great to see a major amount because it is more than needed, to say the very least.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I again thank the Senator for raising this issue. I welcome the opportunity to update the House on the funding allocated in budget 2022. I echo her contribution regarding the work the task forces do. I will put on the record my great admiration and thanks for the great work the volunteers and people in the task forces have done.

I am providing €6 million in new funding for new measures to support the implementation of the national drugs strategy. This funding will strengthen the health-led approach to drugs and alcohol use and will deliver on new strategic priorities for 2021 to 2025 under the national drugs strategy, including commitments in the programme for Government, which the Senator referenced. I am happy to inform the Seanad that I am providing €500,000 to increase access to, and provision of, community-based drug and alcohol services in budget 2022. The funding will have a specific focus on services for women, ethnic minorities and LGBTI+. It will address the barriers women and minority groups can face in accessing drug and alcohol services.

The lived experience of people who use drugs will be central to the design and delivery of the new services. The new services will be developed in conjunction with the national network of drug and alcohol task forces. The Department of Health has published a fact sheet on the allocation of the €6 million funding, which is available online and is being circulated to all stakeholders, including drug and alcohol task forces and the community and voluntary sector.

The Senator will be interested in the other measures I am supporting in budget 2022. These include €1.7 million to increase the availability of HSE drug and alcohol services on a nationwide basis for people with alcohol addiction, people under 18, families affected by drugs and rehabilitation and recovery programmes; €700,000 to reduce the impact of parental drug and alcohol use on children and young people in line with the joint HSE-Tusla Hidden Harm strategic statement and practices guide; €300,000 for harm reduction responses to address high-risk drug use, such as crack cocaine and stimulant drugs in local communities and the night-time economy, and to extend the Naloxone demonstration project to prevent drug overdose deaths; and €700,000 to provide health screening and brief intervention for people who use drugs known as SAOR. This service will be a core component of the health diversion programme for people found in possession of drugs for personal use, so they are treated with compassion and have the opportunity to avoid a criminal conviction. There will also be €300,000 to expand health supports for people who are homeless and have complex health and addiction needs. This includes an additional 260 tenancies under Housing First and an enhanced health service for up to 4,000 single homeless people in Dublin.

I envisage a key role for community and voluntary organisations, including the network of drug and alcohol task forces, in delivering these new measures I announced in budget 2022. Additional resources will be directed towards interventions that lead to reductions in problem drug and alcohol use and achieve an improvement in public health outcomes. Measuring the effectiveness of these additional services will, therefore, be an important objective of public policy.

I thank the Senator for raising the issue of dual diagnosis, which is one that we must work on in all sectors across all Departments. I am keen to work with all stakeholders on ensuring that we can tackle it a bit more robustly than has been the case in recent years.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I acknowledge the Minister of State's personal commitment from the moment he took on this responsibility. He has shown an extraordinary commitment and openness in the context of listening to the sector. I welcome the breakdown of the

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funding allocated. I will be delighted to share that information with the chairs and co-ordinators of the drug and alcohol task forces when I go back to my office. The health model is problematic, though, when we are dealing with such a complex basket of needs. What is required is an interdepartmental and interagency response. I hope that we will get an opportunity in the context of the strategic review to highlight this aspect with the Minister of State. We need discretion in this area and the budget provision must have some sort of discretionary element.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Following agreement on the strategic priorities for the national drugs strategy for the period 2021-25, I recently met with the drug and alcohol task forces, as the Senator said, to outline the additional funding I am providing to deliver on these strategic priorities. This includes €1 million in funding for the development of a programme of community-based drug and alcohol services. The programme will adopt a population-based approach to the provision of drug and alcohol services in line with the Sláintecare model. An allocation of funding will be provided to each community healthcare organisation, and there will be engagement with the drug and alcohol task forces to identify service priorities for their regions. That development has been welcomed by the task forces. I will also be announcing shortly a prevention and education programme on alcohol and drugs use among children and young people. The drug and alcohol task forces will have an opportunity to develop proposals for funding under this programme. Together with the measures announced in budget 2022, this additional funding will strengthen the health-led approach to drugs and alcohol use and deliver on the strategic priorities for the period 2021 to 2025 under the national drugs strategy, as well as on the commitments in the programme for Government.

Freedom of Speech

Senator Paul Gavan: It is always good to see the Minister of State. I thank him for coming into the House. I raise the issue of the continuing incarceration of Julian Assange and ask for urgent action from the Irish Government on this issue and for it to speak out about it. Since 9/11 and the subsequent, and misnamed, war on terror, respect for international law by the US, NATO and other allied countries has virtually collapsed. That has led to the most horrific war crimes and abuses being committed. Sadly, Ireland is implicated in this situation because of our facilitation of the US military at Shannon Airport.

Mr. Assange has spent ten years incarcerated, first in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and then in solitary confinement for the past two years in Belmarsh Prison in the UK. Although a British court refused to extradite Mr. Assange due to fears that he would not survive the US penal system, that decision is now being challenged by the US Government. If the appeal succeeds, then Mr. Assange will face a sentence of 175 years in prison. He will likely spend that time in extreme isolation. This is clearly a politically motivated case, taken simply because Mr. Assange exposed US military and other war crimes, human rights abuses and corruption in the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The documents released by WikiLeaks were published widely by mainstream media outlets such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde* and many others. First came revelations of the breaches of international law at Guantanamo Bay and then the collateral murder video, which recorded US pilots in an Apache helicopter gleefully slaughtering 18 innocent Iraqi civilians. In co-ordination with international media organisations, Mr. Assange followed those revelations with the Afghan war diaries and the Iraq war diaries, which exposed

major war crimes committed by US forces and their allies.

Mr. Assange is, in effect, a political prisoner. His continued incarceration and threatened extradition to the US, therefore, is not just a threat to him personally but to all journalists, editors and publishers and the cause of investigative journalism, press freedom and freedom of speech generally. It is ironic that western countries, which claim to be defenders of freedom, are acting in this way.

3 o'clock

In fairness to the Government, in recent times the Minister for Foreign Affairs has been very outspoken on both the failures of international policies and the very clear abuse of power shown by nations, in particular in respect of journalists and political opponents. Recently the Minister condemned the incarceration of Alexei Navalny in Russia. He also spoke out about the Ryanair flight that was in effect hijacked over Belarus to detain Roman Protasevich, a journalist who was outspoken against the Belarusian Government. Even more recently the Minister outlined his views on the catastrophic failures in US foreign policies in Afghanistan. It was those failures of American policymakers that Julian Assange helped to highlight and let the world know about. He is an outstanding journalist and a credit to the work he has done. He should be treated as such and should not be held in captivity any more. He should be released immediately. Ireland now has a very strong voice in our position on the UN Security Council. It is time we used that for the common good and spoke up for Julian Assange.

Mr. Assange has suffered enough simply because he exposed through his journalism extensive government deceit, corruption, war crimes, state-sponsored killings, extraordinary rendition, military cover-ups of unlawful killings and, ultimately, the true wholesale horror of the disastrous, futile wars led by the US and British Governments. It is time for us to speak out. We cannot pick and choose which human rights issues we wish to speak out about. If we believe in freedom of speech, it must apply to Julian Assange as well as others.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank Senator Gavan for raising this matter, which has been the subject of much media comment in recent years. My colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, has informed me that officials of his Department are following the case of Mr. Julian Assange. Mr. Assange, an Australian citizen and the public face of the Wikileaks website, was arrested by British police in London in April 2019 after he left the Embassy of the Republic of Ecuador because the asylum that had been granted to him by Ecuador about seven years previously was withdrawn. He was initially jailed in May 2019 at Belmarsh Prison, London, for a breach of bail conditions. In September 2019 his remand status was changed from a serving prisoner to a person facing extradition. Mr. Assange is currently detained in the UK on an extradition request from the United States. In September 2020 he appeared before the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales for an extradition hearing. He faced a United States federal grand jury indictment. According to a US Department of Justice release of 24 June 2020, this indictment included charges of conspiracy to obtain and disclose national defence information, conspiracy to commit computer intrusions, seven counts of obtaining national defence information and nine counts of disclosure of national defence information.

On 4 January 2021, at Westminster Magistrates Court, the request of the United States for Mr. Assange's extradition was refused. The full text of this ruling can be found on the website of the Judiciary of England and Wales. I understand from press reports that the United States

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Government lodged an appeal against this ruling on 15 January 2021 and was given more time to submit detailed grounds for its appeal. Recent media coverage indicates that in August the UK High Court handed down a judgment that will allow the US Government to expand the grounds for this appeal. According to the press reports, Mr. Assange appeared at the hearing via video link from Belmarsh Prison.

The Minister considers this to be a legal matter within the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom that appears to be subject to ongoing legal proceedings. The question of the next steps for Mr. Assange rests with the UK judicial authorities. As legal proceedings are under way on this matter in another jurisdiction, the Minister does not intend to comment on this case.

Senator Paul Gavan: It is so disappointing. We have a seat on the UN Security Council yet the Minister of State says the Government will not comment on perhaps the biggest human rights case facing the western world. What a contrast with the situation in Belarus. That is a situation involving a legal case. That is a legal matter and the Government has no problem commenting on it. It has no problem commenting on legal proceedings in Russia but it will not offer a word of condemnation or stand for human rights when it comes to a man who has done more to expose war crimes than any other individual in my lifetime. The Minister of State is here to say there is nothing to see here and he will not comment.

Where are the values of this Government? How can this be acceptable in the face of the horrendous plight of Mr. Julian Assange? We all know why this is happening. The US wants to send a message to the world that if anybody tells the world what it does, this is the treatment that will be meted out. This is the punishment that will be received. We can see that happening to Julian but the Minister of State is here saying he has no comment. It is appalling.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Senator and have taken note of his remarks on the matter, specifically those on our seat at the United Nations Security Council and what is, effectively, a difference of opinion on matters related to Belarus and Russia. I will bring them back to the Minister. This is a legal matter within the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom and it appears to be the subject of ongoing legal proceedings, as I have already explained. The next steps in what happens to Mr. Assange rest with the UK judicial authorities. Again, as legal proceedings are under way with this matter in another jurisdiction, it is very difficult for us to comment on it. I will bring the Senator's views and concerns back to the Minister and I hope we can get a reply from the Department.

Water Services

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Malcolm Noonan. The next matter is from Senator Fiona O'Loughlin and relates to the water supply issues at the Ballymore Eustace plan in the great County Kildare. She is welcome.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: It is absolutely the great county of Kildare. I am glad the Acting Chairman said that. I welcome the Minister of State, and I hope he will take on board the comments and points I will make. I certainly welcome any answers he has.

“Water is the lifeblood of our bodies, our economy, our nation and our well-being.” That is a quote from Mr. Stephen Johnson, a former head of the American Environmental Protection Agency, and it rings completely true to us. I know the Minister of State is familiar with Kildare,

where Ballymore Eustace has Ireland's largest water treatment plant, serving a population of almost 1 million people. It is located in County Kildare, although it is looked after by Dublin City Council. I am raising the really important question of water quality and the management of our water treatment plants.

We were all shocked in August to learn of the incidents that occurred at the Ballymore Eustace treatment plant, as well as the Creagh water treatment plant at Gorey. It is clear the management of these facilities failed miserably. Essentially, the management had to protect and safeguard the quality of water coming from these facilities but that did not happen. The failure of the local authorities, including Dublin City Council and Wexford County Council, to report issues with water quality to Irish Water in a timely manner led to an absolutely unacceptable delay in the Environmental Protection Agency and the Health Service Executive being notified, meaning there was no opportunity to issue a boil water notice. A prompt response could have protected the over 900,000 people dependent on this water supply from being needlessly put at risk.

We all accept a boil water notice is a major inconvenience, and I agree that they should be used sparingly and only issued when absolutely necessary. In these cases, however, a notice would have allowed people to protect themselves while the problems at water treatment plants were resolved. The failure in communication allowed consumption to continue as normal when it was known there was a problem. I put it to the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, that this was simply unacceptable. I find even more concerning the reports of how the specific issues were dealt with, such as the pump failure in Ballymore Eustace and the power failure at Creagh water treatment plant. Even under normal circumstances we were failing to protect our water supply. A safe and secure water supply is the very least that any of us can expect in our country. A recent audit has found that chlorine levels at the Ballymore Eustace plant were below standard even when the facility was functioning normally. This means that the water coming out of people's taps was regularly put at risk. That is absolutely unacceptable. Unfortunately, these are not isolated incidents. The entire process of how we supply water in the State needs to be reviewed. It is clear that enhanced scrutiny and oversight of the entire process is needed. Indeed, a month ago in this House I spoke about the issue whereby a number of eels were entering the water supply in the Carlow north regional water facility, which supplies water to Castledermot in south Kildare.

These are just three examples I have given to the Minister of State but I could go on all day recounting stories of issues from across my county and the country. What plans are in place to ensure a reliable and safe water supply to be provided to Irish citizens? What mitigation measures were put in place to give the general public confidence in the water coming from their taps?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I agree with the contention about the great County Kildare. I have Kildare blood in me too. It is a fantastic county.

The Minister requested that Irish Water undertake audits on the largest water treatment plants in the State serving the majority of the population. These are now complete and refresher training has been provided to the operatives at these plants. In addition, refresher training is being provided to all local authority management and engineers who are then cascading this training to all operatives and technical staff in all 800-plus water treatment plants nationwide.

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I assure the Senator that we acknowledge there were clear and unacceptable failings here in terms of communication. People took ill from what happened at these plants. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, acted swiftly with Irish Water, with the local authorities and with local government in general to ensure that incidents of this nature do not happen again

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I appreciate that it has been acknowledged that there were clear communication failures in what happened with the Ballymore Eustace and Gorey supplies. We have to ensure that does not happen again. I appreciate the plants are now stable and operating normally, are producing clean and wholesome water and the refresher training has been put in place for all staff. That is very important.

The Minister of State has mentioned very significant investment of €1.57 billion next year, which is an incredible amount of money. If that is what is needed for a safe and secure supply of clean water, then it is money well spent. It is about the outcomes, however, it is not about the money spent. We must ensure we do not have these systemic failures again because, as I said at the start, the very least people can expect is access to safe, secure water.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Again, I want to give that assurance the Senator that certainly the learning experiences from this incident have been taken on board. The Minister, as I said, has acted swiftly and the Senator is correct in saying the investment of €1.57 billion is needed. That is sustained investment that is required over a period of time. The investment of €6 billion over the lifetime of the national development plan, NDP, is required because, as we have heard in this House and in the Dáil, we have had a number of incidents throughout the country where there have been discharges of raw sewage into watercourses. It is unacceptable from a human health and biodiversity point of view and these have to be addressed. That is why the Government is deeply committed now to ensuring we have a fit-for-purpose water and wastewater treatment system that is suitable for the needs and growth of the population in years to come. It is only fit and right we continue to invest, and this Government is committed to record investment in water and wastewater treatment over the next decade.

Sitting suspended at 3.17 p.m. and resumed at 3.30 p.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Cathaoirleach: Since we were here last there have been a number of tragedies and sad passings. Máire Mhac an tSaoi and my fellow Kerryman, Brendan Kennelly, are a great loss to the nation and to their families. Our condolences to all the bereaved.

Last Friday, we saw the killing of Sir David Amess. I know I speak on behalf of all members of Seanad Éireann when I express our heartfelt sympathies to his family on their unimaginable loss. I also extend our sympathies to his parliamentary colleagues in Westminster who have felt his loss keenly on a personal level. They rightly see this, as we do, as an attack on democracy itself. All of us in Seanad Éireann are all too well aware of the degrading language and intemperate attitudes often used in political discourse in this day and age. While we all recognise that vigorous debate is part of our democracy, those who refuse to recognise and respect the right of people to hold different views and opinions need to reflect upon the kind of intolerance that sometimes leads to events such as the killing of Sir David. Sir David was a man of great dignity and principle. He was a decent man. He was a good friend of Ireland and he was an associate member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Association. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I join the Cathaoirleach in his comments on Sir David Amess. His death has sent shock waves through politics here and in the UK. Most worrying was the commentary to the effect that somehow it was justified because of the job he was doing or the party he was a member of. This is a cause for concern for all of us. It is something to be vigilant about. We send our thoughts, prayers and sympathies to his family, friends and colleagues and to the community he served with distinction for so many years.

The Order of Business is No. 1, statements on Sláintecare, to be taken at 5 p.m. and to conclude at 6.30 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to opening remarks by the Minister not to exceed ten minutes and the time allocated to all Senators not to exceed five minutes, with the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 84.4, Private Members' business, motion regarding flooding, to be taken at 6.45 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: On behalf of the Fianna Fáil party, I join the Cathaoirleach in sending sympathies to the family and, indeed, to the Westminster family of Sir David Amess. He was a very fine and distinguished parliamentarian.

I also send condolences to the families of Máire Mhac An tSaoi and Brendan Kennelly. At a time when coarse language is something that is used all too often, we had two wonderful poets who espoused the positive use of language. We are the poorer for their loss but the richer for their having lived.

I will support the proposed Order of Business. There are a number of issues I wish to raise. The first relates to an article I read yesterday that shocked me. It concerned a man who tried to choke his ex-partner and was jailed for just three months. His defence maintained that the fact he was "off his face" on cocaine was almost an explanation for the brutal attack he committed. It is shocking. His three small children, who were witnesses to the attack, tried to protect their mother and stop the attack using Power Rangers swords. It was such a vicious attack, in which the mum was left badly bruised and with broken fingers. That the sentence was only three months long is completely wrong. We talk about Supporting a Victim's Journey, which is the name of a new plan under the Department of Justice, but this sentence does not send a clear message to perpetrators or would-be perpetrators.

An Cathaoirleach: I remind Senators that in respect of court judgments, sentencing can always be appealed. We must be mindful when we raise issues relating to courts in the context of the separation of powers between Seanad Éireann and the Courts Service.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I accept that but sentencing should reflect the crime. We have to take into account the impact on children.

I raise also the issue of derelict sites. I have become aware of a number of derelict sites within my town of Newbridge and around south County Kildare that are owned by investment funds. They are a blight on the estates on which they are situated. Dumping is going on and young people are hanging around, yet it is difficult for Kildare County Council, in this instance, to secure the property because of the legal issues. There needs to be a streamlined system whereby properties can be secured if, after a period, the owners cannot be contacted in order that the sites can be taken by the local authority and turned into accommodation. We all recognise and acknowledge the need for more houses but something needs to be done in respect of derelict sites.

19 October 2021

Senator Martin Conway: I thank the Deputy Leader for outlining the proposed Order of Business. On behalf of the Fine Gael group in this House, I join the Cathaoirleach in extending our sympathies to the family of Sir David Amess. As a new member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, of which Sir David was also a member, it is a sad day for me. Many of our colleagues in this House met him and worked with him on British-Irish relations over the years. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

I join also in the tributes to Brendan Kennelly and Máire Mhac an tSaoi. Brendan Kennelly was a feature of the streets of Dublin city for decades and always gave up his time freely to young people who were interested in literature. This country has benefited greatly from the wisdom of both Brendan Kennelly and Máire Mhac an tSaoi.

It is good news that society is reopening, as will happen on Friday. That must be welcomed but caution has to be exercised. The issue of personal responsibility is now coming to the fore. I have no doubt that when the people are asked to show personal responsibility, to be careful, cautious and considerate and to step back when necessary, that will happen. I wish the businesses that will reopen on Friday, after 19 long months, the very best. I hope it will go smoothly, carefully and safely.

On health issues, the hospitals in Galway and Limerick are very overcrowded. We also know the flu vaccination season had begun. While I welcome the Government's announcement that it will extend the remit of those who can receive free flu vaccines, we need to go further. We have seen the success of the Covid-19 vaccine in this country and we need to see the uptake of the flu vaccine at 90% plus. I call on the Government to make the flu vaccine free to everybody - it will be a small cost - and to encourage take-up. At present, it is a case of us being penny wise pound foolish. If we can get 90% of the population to take the flu vaccine injection, we would reap the rewards with fewer presentations at accident and emergency units throughout the country, and it would be a small cost to bear. I call on the Leader to contact the Minister to articulate that view and, if necessary, to allow a debate in this House on the flu injection and its free provision.

There was an incident in my constituency whereby an ambulance had to travel from Galway to Kilkee to attend a road traffic accident. That is totally unacceptable. We need a debate in this House on the National Ambulance Service. There are great women and men, paramedics and drivers, working in the National Ambulance Service but there seems to be a problem with response times and the methods used to co-ordinate it at national level. We need a debate on the National Ambulance Service in recognition of the great work our paramedics do and to ensure the service is quick and responsive and available when people need it.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator for raising the issue of the paramedics. I know the case of a family in distress who were told that no ambulance would attend them. While the ambulance had to travel from Galway to Kilkee in the Senator's example, there was no ambulance available to help this family.

Senator Martin Conway: That is not acceptable.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I concur with the sympathies expressed by the Cathaoirleach to the family of Sir David Amess.

On Thursday evening, I called to my grandchildren - I know the Leader has young children - and the excitement in my six-year-old granddaughter's eyes when she sat me down to tell me

she was going to read me a story and, as she read me the story, the excitement in the four-year-old sat beside her, watching as her sister read, was something to behold. I missed a lot of that with my own kids, but it was really something else in this case.

Why I am bringing this up today? On 19 August, at the United Nations Security Council, Ireland and Mexico urged the Security Council to place the utmost priority on protecting and vindicating the rights of Afghan women and girls in all decisions and actions on Afghanistan's future. They jointly outlined the actions that the council must take. They stated:

1. The Security Council must unite and express clearly its rejection of these assaults on the rights of women and girls.

2. The Council must as a matter of urgency call on all parties to respect and facilitate the emergency evacuation and safe and timely departure of Afghans, including human rights defenders, women leaders and those involved in public life, women's rights activists, peace-builders and journalists, who wish to leave the country.

3. The Council must continue to demand full, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access: this must include access for women humanitarians and frontline workers throughout the country to carry out their lifesaving work.

4. The Security Council must insist with all Afghan parties that the full, equal and meaningful participation of women in any new government is a non-negotiable condition of international engagement.

What does all this mean? They are all fine words, but no real impact has been made on the care for women and girls as a result of this statement. Ireland spent millions to win the seat in this talking shop, known as the United Nations Security Council, but the permanent members can literally veto anything they wish to defend their national interests, to uphold something in their foreign policy, or because of some issue of particular importance to their state. The use of the veto by Russia and China has risen considerably since 2012, with the conflict in Syria accounting for the bulk of these. Since 2011, Russia has cast 19 vetoes, 14 of which have been on Syria, two on the conflict in Ukraine, and one on Yemen. Eight of the nine vetoes taken by China during the period have been about Syria and one has been about Venezuela. The United States has cast three vetoes since 2011, all of them to do with Israel-Palestine issues.

Perhaps someone might tell me what is the purpose of having a seat on the United Nations Security Council. Why even bother with this bloody talking shop? I have pages upon pages of vetoes since 1946. In all, there were 220 vetoes between 1946 and 2004. From 2004 on they have stepped up the number of vetoes. Why are we participating in this talking shop? How has this talking shop helped the women of Afghanistan today who are prevented from what my granddaughter takes for granted? How do we get women participating in education? Can you even begin to imagine what it is like for a young girl who had three or four years' schooling not to have it now, or for a young woman who had been in university and maybe had one or two years' university education and suddenly it is gone? Talk is cheap and at the end of the day I see no practical steps being proposed by Ireland in any way. Our presidency of the United Nations Security Council is meaningless when you can have anything we say vetoed. I would love a debate on this in the near future.

Senator Paul Gavan: I propose an amendment to the Order of Business, that is, that No. 19 be taken before No. 1. I wish to introduce the Safe Access to Termination of Pregnancy Ser-

vices Bill 2021. While Sinn Féin is proud to be supporting this Bill, all credit for this Bill belongs to Together for Safety, a national campaign group for safe access zones that I have had the privilege to work with for the past number of years. This is very much a cross-party initiative. I acknowledge the strong support of the Labour Party, which will be seconding this proposal this morning, and the Civil Engagement Group, which has been consistently to the fore in engaging this issue. I also acknowledge the support of Senator O'Reilly from the Green Party, Senator McGreehan from Fianna Fáil and the father of the House, Senator David Norris, all of whom have co-signed this Bill. I also want to acknowledge the contribution of Senators O'Loughlin and Fitzpatrick who joined us behind the Together for Safety banner at lunchtime today.

Every week, there are gatherings of anti-choice protestors outside maternity hospitals. The previous Government promised safe access zone legislation to ensure these protests would not take place outside these hospitals. There are people monitoring, marching, praying and watching women and pregnant people going in and out of maternity hospitals. Every day there are protestors outside the maternity hospital in my home city of Limerick. I hope the Leader will agree with me that people have fundamental rights to privacy and dignity, especially so when they are visiting a hospital. I ask Members to think about the impact of these protestors on people as they access healthcare throughout the State. I ask them to listen to just two quotes from people who have encountered these protestors. I am grateful to my colleagues in Together for Safety for supplying these quotes. The first quote reads:

She asked me if I had an appointment across the road. I presumed she was making small talk as she also had one so I said yes I did. She told me she and her friends were praying that no babies were murdered in the hospital that day.

The second quote reads:

They were sprinkling holy water and saying prayers outside our hospital setting while there is women having miscarriages, or having stillbirths each week or carrying their babies out in white coffins.

These protests, which are happening outside many hospitals throughout the State, are attempting to intimidate and cause upset. They are invading the privacy and bodily autonomy of women and pregnant people at a profoundly vulnerable and sensitive time. People should not have to access healthcare like this. We have been promised legislation for more than three years. It was supposed to be passed in 2019 by then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris. It was not. What was particularly worrying was a reply I received from Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, to the effect that there was no need for such legislation. I received that reply in May, and a similar reply was given to the *Irish Examiner* in August. Thanks to Together for Safety, we have a Bill in the Seanad. I appeal to Members from all parties to get behind this Bill and ensure a swift passage through this Chamber. Women and pregnant people have been left waiting for far too long. My party colleague, Senator Ó Donnghaile, along with the leaders of the Labour Party and the Civil Engagement Group in this House will be writing to the Leader asking for an early cross-party slot for Private Members' time so that we can progress this Bill which is in line with a commitment given in the programme for Government. I ask all Members on a cross-party basis to support this legislation and get this done. Women should not have to continue to access healthcare in this fashion.

Senator Mark Wall: I want to be associated with the vote of sympathy at the start of business today on behalf of the Labour Party.

I want to raise two issues today. The first is to seek a further debate on housing. My colleague, Senator Moynihan, has continued to raise the housing crisis on an almost daily basis. In asking for a debate I want to reference an interview I heard this morning on my local radio station, KFM, on my way to the House. Professor Rory Hearne of Maynooth University was interviewed about an article he had written about NAMA the previous day in the *Irish Examiner*. He called for an urgent review from a social and economic perspective of what NAMA does and how it contributes to the State from that point of view. I join him in that call. Some headlines from what he said refer to the fact that NAMA has €1.2 billion in funding reserves and 577 ha of residential development land. NAMA is currently selling 400 homes across the country. Professor Hearne stated NAMA could be directed to provide 4,000 cost rental and 4,000 affordable homes a year. Given the crisis, I totally agree with him. We cannot ignore what NAMA is doing and could do. Too many families in the State are continuing to cry out for housing and are in need of help.

The second item I want to raise today is rubbish and the continuing problem of illegal dumping in this country. In March this year, with the support of the House, we passed Second Stage of the Local Government (Use of CCTV in the Prosecution of Offences) Bill. In his reply to the debate, the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, welcomed the Bill and stated that the Government was working on Ireland's waste action plan for the circular economy, originally published in September 2020, which commits the Government to implementing a range of measures including tackling the problem of illegal dumping. On the specific advice received from the Data Protection Commissioner regarding the Bill, which I hope the Bill will address, the Minister of State said that was currently under consideration by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. He also stated that, for its part, the Government was in contact with the County and City Management Association, CCMA, on practical issues raised by the Data Protection Commissioner and those which our Bill also raised.

Unfortunately, as I am sure many Members of the House are aware, illegal dumping is as bad as ever. My local authority, Kildare County Council, recently ran a one-day amnesty on mattresses and couches. In one day alone, it collected 75 tonnes of couches and mattresses at an estimated cost of €50,000. I continue to receive calls on a weekly - sometimes daily - basis about this issue. There is no doubt that we need solutions and the use of CCTV will help. We estimated at the time of the debate on the Bill that €90 million is being spent nationally on the clean-up of illegal dumping. As I said before, we can imagine the number of community projects we could complete with this money. I want to thank once again all of the Tidy Towns and community groups that do so much to combat this problem. They are to be congratulated. I would appreciate if the Leader could organise a debate on the circular economy Bill with the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications so that we can discuss, and finally come up with some solutions to, this massive problem for our State.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Anyone who has ever had a problem with his or her sight or has had an injury to his or her eyes knows how frightening it can be when one's vision is compromised. Unfortunately, recent figures from the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, make for depressing reading. As of August 2021, 41,200 people were waiting for an outpatient eye care clinic appointment, with approximately 7,800 people waiting on an inpatient eye procedure. Waiting lists, as we know, were high before Covid. Unfortunately, Covid, to put it mildly, has not helped matters. The Association of Optometrists Ireland says it can provide

a solution to this problem. There are 300 optometrists and 700 practitioners located across the country in state-of-the-art premises providing great care on a private basis to many of our citizens. They are highly trained and have the necessary equipment to be able to address the problem that we currently have. However, unfortunately in this country we do not seem to engage with such professionals to the same extent as many colleagues across other European countries do, and I believe this is a major mistake on the part of the HSE. I recently mentioned the Sligo cataract scheme, which was a joint operation between the HSE and optometrists in the area who tackled the long waiting lists for cataracts. It was a success. I believe what is being proposed would reduce waiting times and would be a cost-effective service. It would be very accessible and a better use of equipment and personnel than is currently the case. Surely it is time we opened our eyes to the benefits of such a scheme. I ask that the Minister be invited to the House so we can debate the merits of developing such a relationship.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I wish to express my grave reservations over our media and their coverage of the current state of Covid-19 in this country. Ever since the beginning of our vaccination programme, I have been constant in warning against the dangers of dividing society along the lines of vaccination status and opposed any legislation that encouraged it. Imagine my disappointment then when I tuned into “The Pat Kenny Show” to hear the host demonising 17-year-old children for going to the cinema and referring to them as “vaccinatable”, as if a person’s worth is based on whether we can jab them and include them as a figure on the vaccine uptake tally.

Only a few weeks ago, we were all smugly patting ourselves on the back as articles about our great vaccine uptake flooded in. The unspoken message was that we were great, selfless and educated, unlike other countries, whose people were acting like savages. A fat lot of good that has done us as the Taoiseach has confirmed that our restrictions will once again live on past their supposed expiry date, while other countries with much lower vaccination uptakes are now more successful at suppressing the virus.

It is clear then that the current tone reflecting the position that the only reason we are having a problem with the virus is due to the individuals choosing not to get vaccinated is not only deeply insulting, discriminatory and harmful, it is also incorrect. This hunting around for some cohort of ordinary people to blame must stop and the responsibility for that lies with our media figures and outlets.

It was not even two weeks ago when we stood in this Chamber and were told that the continuation of Covid certificates past 22 October was unlikely. At this stage, I cannot even muster any surprise that while the rest of Europe is up and running, the Government maintains its policy of fear and stifling caution, and rushes to move the goalposts once again. The message after today’s announcement is very clear. People who are not vaccinated can and will be treated like second-class citizens. They will be dehumanised, labelled and cancelled unless they do what they are told. “Follow the science” means, “Shut up and do as we say.”

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I will make one response to Senator Keogan. Large sections of Europe have opened up but anyone who travels anywhere in Europe is required to show a vaccination certificate on entry to bars, restaurants and venues. I know that from experience. The Government is, therefore, in line with the rest of Europe in requiring the Covid certificate to be shown and that is the correct approach.

I wish to raise two linked events that have happened in recent days. The first was the rather

amusing takedown of Nigel Farage by RTÉ's Claire Byrne, exposing his lack of knowledge of Irish history. The fewer platforms that are given to his anti-immigrant, anti-European, populist nonsense, the better. The second event happened last Friday when, in a much more serious vein, film director David Puttnam, speaking at a lecture in honour of the late Shirley Williams, spoke of the pig ignorance of some British politicians regarding Ireland, and in particular his fear of the way in which Rupert Murdoch has helped to remake Britain in his own malevolent image. We should have concerns about both of those events. There is an issue around the level of awareness of Irish history and politics among some in British society. That sometimes stems from ignorance and is often because education of that history does not exist in Britain. It is important for us, in our efforts in foreign affairs, to communicate effectively our history and politics.

We should not rest on our laurels and simply assume that we do not have populists here. Unfortunately, we have seen a deterioration in standards among some involved in journalism to the level of the red-top standards we see in the UK. There is a real responsibility on those of us in politics and journalism to ensure that commentary is informed and, in particular, constructive.

4 o'clock

Senator John Cummins: I want to raise an important matter, namely, the employment wage subsidy and the Rebuilding Ireland home loan. Last week, in budget 2022, the Government extended the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, until 30 April 2022. This is an extraordinary measure for extraordinary times. It is further evidence of the Government's support for businesses to help them to get back on their feet as the pandemic recedes. However, I am facing increasing unwillingness on the part of councils, the Department and the Housing Finance Agency to approve Rebuilding Ireland home loans for applicants in the EWSS. One such case, with which I am dealing, concerns a hospitality worker who is now working more hours than he ever did. He has received a promotion and a corresponding increase in wages but is unable to get approval for a Rebuilding Ireland home loan because his company is availing of the EWSS. Another case of mine involves a childcare worker who is in very similar circumstances. While I understand that the EWSS is to support businesses, its extension until April 2022 brings more uncertainty for those very people whom we are trying to support as a State, and whom we are trying to support in becoming the owner of their first home. Therefore, I would appreciate it if the Deputy Leader could arrange a debate on this matter and if we, as a House, wrote to the Department asking it to address this issue as a matter of urgency.

Senator Eugene Murphy: Even though I do not always agree with Senator Keogan, and did not agree with some of her comments today, I am glad she has recovered and is back in the Chamber. It is good to see her back in full health again. I join other Members in extending our sympathies to the family of the Conservative MP Sir David Amess and also to the families of Brendan Kennelly and Máire Mhac an tSaoi.

I propose an amendment to the Order of Business, that is, that No. 20 be taken before No. 1. During my term in Dáil Éireann, I produced a Bill on flooding along the River Shannon. I am reintroducing it as the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2021. The scourge of flooding over many years, particularly along the basin of the River Shannon, has not been properly addressed by politicians in this country. We all attend the meetings, listen to the complaints, put on the wellies and walk the land that has been destroyed but, in reality, the time has come to truly deal with this issue. It can be dealt with in an environmentally friendly way, and this could take away a lot of the misery felt by people along the river. Everybody knows the pat-

tern of rainfall has changed dramatically in recent years. The amount of rain that fell over two days years ago can now fall in two or three hours. This, in itself, has brought new and untold problems to many families. Businesses have been wiped out and farms have been destroyed. People's mental health has suffered drastically over flooding along the River Shannon. I hope that when the Bill is introduced, we will have a good debate on it and it will be supported. It is time that we got the necessary legislation through and dealt with what has been a terrible scourge, affecting mainly people in rural areas. I acknowledge, however, that flooding can hit many communities in Ireland nowadays.

Senator John McGahon: Today I would like to talk about the further digitisation of Irish society. Particularly in the past year and half, owing to Covid, society has become more cashless than ever before. For example, I do not even carry a wallet anymore. I have my ATM on my card. I rarely carry cash any more and it is the same for many people across the board.

When I talk about the digitisation of Irish society it is about how we make it more efficient. I have not come up with exactly who we have to ask yet and will definitely take advice on that, but there are two ways in which we can make it more efficient. First of all, when people have ATM cards on their mobile phones they should be able to withdraw money if they need it from an ATM cashpoint using their phones. They are not able to do that unless they have a hard copy card. This is something that would aid the digitisation of Irish society more. The second point relates to IDs and we see it with Covid certificates. In order to enter any place, whether it is a pub or restaurant, one needs to have a Covid certificate accompanied by ID to prove who one is. Again, since so few people are carrying wallets any more, very few people keep physical ID on them, unless it is a driver's licence in their car and so on.

The point is we should also look at introducing variable IDs on people's mobile phones so they can rock along and will be able to show straight up drivers' licence or passport in a digitised version that is accepted across the board. To be fair, I would not expect to go somewhere and be allowed to show a photo of my passport or my ID. We accept IDs in hard copies. We should now be able to accept them in soft copies. The Government should be able to introduce something that it has labelled and agreed and can be used right across the mark. The same thing should be done with ATM cards where physical money can be withdrawn from an ATM bank machine with a mobile phone.

Senator Rebecca Moynihan: I am not here to speak on the Order of Business but to second the safety access Bill. I did not think I was down to speak. I will happily speak-----

An Cathaoirleach: We always like to hear the Senator's words of wisdom. She is on the list I have.

Senator Rebecca Moynihan: I have not got anything prepared. I compliment Senator Gavan on his work with Together for Safety in Limerick in bringing in safe access zones legislation. I will make the point that the women who are being intimidated as they go through maternity services include women who are coming out of the hospital having received terrible news or are going in to access abortion services. Protests outside hospitals and GP surgeries also create a chill effect on GPs being able to operate their services. Just 10% of GPs and just over half of maternity units in this country are operating abortion services.

We still have a very long way to go in offering safe, legal and local access for women to services. That is why it is so important this legislation is passed. There are women now who are,

let us say, living in a county like Sligo who have to undertake a 100-mile round trip to access a GP in another county and return after three days. The repeal review is coming up. We know that women still have to travel to the UK because their timelines are very short and because there are many grounds that are not covered under the legislation. I ask and urge Members of the Government side of the House in particular, to advocate within the Government to try to fast track the safe access zone legislation.

I saw in last week's budget something about which Senator Chambers has been very passionate and has spoken about a number of times in the House, that is, the funding for free contraception that came out of the committee work on the eighth amendment. It is very important this legislation is passed because the chill effect on GPs and maternity services means women are not able to access the local services they need.

Senator Paul Daly: I second Senator Murphy's proposed amendment to the Order of Business. In doing so, I compliment him on the great work he has put into that issue. He has come up with a very common-sense approach to what is an ongoing issue.

I will raise an issue that both the Leas-Chathaoirleach and the Cathaoirleach will possibly tell me before I am finished is more appropriate to a Commencement matter, but I received a message regarding it last night, we are in recess next week and it is important it is brought to the House. My lobbying will be strengthened by something from the House. A member of the Irish diaspora in Canada turned up at the airport to come home, unfortunately, for his father's funeral. He was fully vaccinated and had his certificate stating same, but he was told Ireland did not recognise mixed vaccinations and he was sent away to get a test. He had to go home and come back the next day. He just made the funeral by a matter of hours but could equally have missed it.

This is a vitally important issue. I will make personal representations to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Health, or whoever is responsible for areas outside the EU where its digital Covid-19 certificate does not apply, particularly for people of Irish origin and Irish citizens. Some of those people got mixed vaccinations, but it is important that we recognise that they are vaccinated. They have the certification that states they are vaccinated. The fact that it may have involved the use of two different vaccines may be a bonus, as many people would tell us. Apparently, however, the man to whom I refer was told that the authorities in Ireland are not recognising mixed vaccinations. He was sent home to get a test and then barely made it back to his father's funeral by the skin of his teeth.

It may well have been more appropriate for me to address the Minister directly about this issue. As we are in recess next week, I would appreciate if the Leader and the House would strengthen my case with the Minister in this regard by adding their voices in support of the necessity of recognising the vaccination status of Irish and non-Irish residents abroad. If these people are vaccinated, they are vaccinated, and this issue must be addressed.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I also extend my condolences to the family of David Amess. I felt emotional reading all the comments on Twitter. Even after this man's death, there continued to be negative comments. It is shocking to see that someone has no peace even in death. I do not want to turn this into being about us as politicians, but Senator Moynihan spoke about a chill effect in her contribution and this event is having a chilling effect on politics. One does feel a little exposed standing up to speak about something or, indeed, putting oneself forward to participate in politics. I hope people feel that there is a sense of solidarity across the Chamber

and across the two islands.

I commend Senator Gavan for the proposed Bill on safe access zones and Senator Moynihan as well. Those on the Government side of the House support the Bill as well and it is good to see that we have that cross-party support for an issue of this importance. Safe access zones should have been a part of the original legislation in 2018, but we are where we are. The Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, has acted on this issue. He told me that I could raise the issue and that Government legislation is being drafted. This is positive news from both sides of the House and I look forward to further debate on the issue. This year's budget contains much feminist healthcare and that is remarkable compared with previous budgets. I refer to the provision of free contraception and menopause centres being established across the country. All I can say is "let us have more of that". I am delighted that we can progress some of these issues, but safe access zones must now be a priority.

Senator Ned O'Sullivan: Everybody from my generation will be familiar with this beautiful poem written by Máire Mhac an tSaoi, who sadly passed away at the weekend:

Le coinnle na n-aingeal tá an spéir amuigh breactha,

Tá fiacail an tseaca sa ghaoith on gcnoc,

Adaigh an tine is téir chun an leapan,

Luífidh Mac Dé ins an tigh seo anocht.

She was one of the outstanding poets writing in Irish and she left a fantastic legacy. Máire Mhac an tSaoi was an extraordinary woman. The daughter of Seán MacEntee, she was educated in the Sorbonne and then became a diplomat. Máire Mhac an tSaoi was the wife of Conor Cruise O'Brien, and what a contrast there must have been there and what great debates they must have had.

It is extraordinary that on the same day she died we lost our great Kerry poet and the most beautiful voice of Brendan Kennelly. I did not know Máire Mhac an tSaoi personally, but I am privileged to say that Brendan Kennelly was a great friend of mine. I knew him from home. One of the great advantages of becoming a Senator was that I was able to meet him fairly regularly here in my early years in town. We generally met on Duke Street for a chat. In later years that was over coffee, where we would be pretending that it was much better for us than whiskey. He still retained a wonderful charm and facility for the English language. He was a poet of the people. He and John B. Keane, my other neighbour, had great roguery in them.

I will finish with a story. I do not know which one of them it is about, but the two of them met one time and they were discussing their literary legacies. One asked the other what he would like to be remembered as. By the way, they were also nice footballers in their day. The other said he would like to be remembered as the man who scored the winning point in the final of the north Kerry championship. That simplicity and that genius were in both of them. We have lost two wonderful voices. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha.

An Cathaoirleach: Ar dheis Dé go raibh anam Brendan Kennelly, and thank you, Senator O'Sullivan, for sharing that story. Being from Kerry, I know the importance of scoring the winning point in the north Kerry championship. In north Kerry, it is more important than scoring the winning point in an all-Ireland final for Kerry.

Senator Emer Currie: I thank Senator O’Sullivan. That is a hard one to follow.

I wish to raise Circular 0050/2021 on teacher substitution. We need to take the word of principals on this issue. There has been a chronic crisis regarding substitute teachers, or a chronic shortage of them, over the past few years, not just as a result of the pandemic. I have spoken to principals about this, and the panel system is a really good initiative but is effective only for well-flagged and planned absences. In Dublin West, the substitutes are booked up until January 2022, I am told, and it is impossible to find a substitute teacher at short notice for a day or two. Most schools I spoke to said their own lists of subs had been exhausted and that the people on them are in longer term contracts with schools to cover absences. The schools are not getting any response from the text-a-sub service or the national sub service. The demand for substitution is not diminishing. To take just one 32-classroom school in my area, last week eight teachers were absent, with no teachers coming from the panel. The school managed to get three subs and the principal lost a weekend trying to find replacements. At another school, there were 17 teacher absences. The school was able to secure two substitutes, neither through the panel. Another school has needed a sub on 19 occasions. Schools are pulling subs from everywhere they possibly can, whether through special education teachers, SNAs, early years educators or the principals themselves. It is not just about the special education teachers; it is about schools just trying to stay open. That is not sustainable and not good for continuous professional development.

I think the teachers are quite upset about this because the Department is aware of the issue and these schools fight for special education day in and day out and for resources for their schools. They would not do anything to compromise special education. They are in this position because they have no choice at the moment. I welcome what has been said about looking at the teacher supply action plan and teacher colleges, but we need a realistic and an empathetic plan.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I support Senator Murphy’s comments on the River Shannon, which traverses both our counties.

The Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, was established under the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 to act as a service to mediate and provide dispute resolution between landlords and tenants. The board offers a free mediation service, not only for landlords and tenants but also to third parties directly affected by an issue - for example, an overhanging tree from a neighbour’s property affecting one’s own. This could be blocking daylight, shedding leaves, blocking gutters or destroying patios or gardens. The mediation service for third parties is not known by most homeowners and is poorly promoted through the RTB website. Homeowners email and contact their local councillors regularly, some even going as far as court in order to deal with issues, not just overhanging trees but, indeed, more extreme problems such as harassment from neighbours. The latter is something my wife and I suffered. We had to go to court, where we found that the RTB was not dealing with the issue. The RTB essentially has no power or does not use it and is considered not an option by many, whether due to lack of funding or lack of resources. If the RTB were to reform its website to ensure it is clear that these mediation services are being offered, not only to landlords and tenants but also to those who feel their property is being adversely affected by a neighbour, people would have a body they could contact and work with on an issue. Most people living in semi-detached houses have experienced an issue with a neighbour in their life, whether it be overhanging trees or some more sinister problems. There must be an adequate organisation to work with property owners on their behalf to resolve a matter they may have with neighbours. The RTB is established but it must use its power to

support property owners and prevent such matters going to court and costing many homeowners, landlords and renters money they may not have. The RTB must ensure that its website and mediation services are clear, accessible and understandable for all people. More funding may be required from the Government to improve these services and act as a support for those homeowners, landlords and renters experiencing issues.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the announcement by the Taoiseach earlier today on the continued use of digital Covid certificates. It is something I raised in the Chamber last week. I did so because I felt there was an opportunity to protect businesses and people. It is good that the announcement was made today, and it is significant because a number of measures would not have been possible today if we did not continue using digital Covid certificates. Those measures include unlimited numbers of people being allowed to attend weddings and the reopening of nightclubs. There will now be talk about Christmas parties for the first time in two years. That will only be possible because digital Covid certificates will remain in place.

Speaking to those in the industry, I know this reassures people who have been concerned about going into environments like pubs and cafés. They will now feel protected. It is significant that digital Covid certificates have been protected. The arguments used by people for this being the wrong approach were used a number of months ago, when the certificates were introduced, but the sky has not fallen in. In fact, people have found them quite easy to use. I welcome that the process is being continued until the end of the year.

On Friday, 22 October, it will be International Stuttering Awareness Day. In Ireland, we have a stuttering awareness and mental well-being campaign starting today. Three people - Mr. Michael Ryan in Templemore, Mr. Jamie Gogan and Mr. Michael O'Shea - started that campaign. They met the Lord Mayor of Dublin this afternoon and will be in Buswell's Hotel tomorrow for a number of hours. I encourage Senators to meet them. They will be at the hotel from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m. They are trying to raise awareness in Ireland about stuttering and stammering. They want to encourage people to be who they want to be. It is an opportunity for us to support them. New US President Joe Biden suffered from a stutter. There is a real encouragement to build awareness of the matter. I ask Members if they are available tomorrow between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. to meet those three guys. They are very impressive people.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Codail, a laoi ch dar thugas grá,

codail go sámh i m'bhánbhaclainn,

tusa mo rogha fear Fáil,

thatr rí na bhFiann is a chóir fairis -

Codail, codail, a chúl na lúb,

le faobhar na hoíche, codail, a rún.

As Senator Ned O'Sullivan said, Máire Mhac an tSaoi - and Brendan Kennelly - represented the best of our tradition, writing and communicating as they did in our two main spoken languages. The only contact I had with Máire Mhac an tSaoi was when seeking her permission to use the poem that Senator O'Sullivan recited on a Christmas card I sent from this House a number of years ago. They really were two very impressive people. Ar dheis Dé go raibh siad.

There was a much more untimely, tragic and horrifying death in Britain that we have all

recalled. Sir David Amess had great concern for the unborn, the elderly, those at risk of fuel poverty and the animal kingdom. He was a model of humanity and consistency in a way that is exemplary for many of his contemporaries. If he knew our circumstances, he would have reflected on how the legislation proposed by Sinn Féin and others here today is not necessary. As the Garda Commissioner, Drew Harris, has stated, we have the laws we need to deal with any breaches of public order if such events were to take place. We have our constitutional protection of that delicate but important thing that is freedom of expression and the right of people to assemble. We have the reality that we do not have abortion clinics in Ireland and that abortions take place in relative anonymity. Those who meet to give witness to the dignity of all human life and to the possibility of positive alternatives, we are saying to do this in a way that is very respectful. We need to be careful about trying to pretend that there is no counter narrative on abortion. There is and there always will be. It is important that we hear all voices in society and dialogue with each other respectfully. I believe this is what Sir David Amess would have believed in. I know many of his mutual friends, who are understandably heartbroken. They recall a man who was exemplary in his respect for others and in the way he made his point in politics. It is something that we all, myself included, should to try to imitate.

Senator Barry Ward: I want to mention the platform, Speak Out, that was launched this week by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris. Speak Out is an anonymous online platform that allows students and staff to report incidents of sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, bullying, cyberbullying and everything in between. It is to operate across our third level institutions. It must be a welcome thing. It is wonderful that there is an anonymous online platform that makes it as easy as possible for people to report these activities so they can be dealt with at whatever level is appropriate.

I wonder, in the circumstances, if we should be looking at advancing this tool into secondary schools also. It is not as if we do not know that this kind of behaviour is happening also at second level. There is an opportunity for a similar anonymous online platform to be available to secondary school students, teachers in secondary schools, and parents of students in secondary schools. We know this is happening, and we mention these issues a lot in this House. They have come to the fore particularly in recent years and such behaviour causes enormous damage to the victims.

Sometimes, we expect people to come forward and do what we see many brave victims or survivors of this kind of behaviour do, which is to come forth and stand in the media, sometimes in the spotlight of television cameras, and say what happened to them, but not everybody can do that. It is actually an exceedingly difficult thing to do. The idea of an anonymous online platform is welcome because it allows people who perhaps do not have the wherewithal to stand in the glare of a camera, or the media or in the public eye to say these things. It allows them still to report it and to register what has happened to them, and still to put it into the hands of the officials, and hopefully the mechanism to monitor what is happening and take steps to deal with that.

I welcome Speak Out. It is an excellent initiative and I congratulate the Minister, Deputy Harris, for it. I hope we could possibly extend it into other areas of education, particularly into second level education.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senators. I now invite the Deputy Leader to respond on the Order of Business.

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Senator Lisa Chambers: I first propose, as suggested by An Cathaoirleach, that we hold one minute of silence in respect for David Amess.

Minute's Silence for Sir David Amess

Members rose.

An Cathaoirleach: Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

Order of Business (Resumed)

Senator Lisa Chambers: Senator Fiona O'Loughlin started the Order of Business today and paid her respects to Máire Mhac an tSaoi, Brendan Kennelly and Sir David Amess. A number of colleagues also paid respects to Máire Mhac an tSaoi and Brendan Kennelly. Senators Mullen and O'Sullivan recited very beautifully some poetry for all of us, which was a pleasure to listen to. It is not something I would be capable of doing and I am always very impressed when people recite such things.

Senator O'Loughlin raised a very important issue around the level of sentencing that is being handed down for certain crimes, and particularly for domestic violence crimes. I do believe that three months seems extremely lenient, but we cannot really say much more than that without having the full knowledge of all factors. We do need to send a certain message on sentencing, across the board.

The Senator also raised the important issue of derelict sites in Newbridge and the need to bring those back into use. This would be a huge help in increasing our housing stock. Senator Conway spoke about the reopening of Ireland, which was announced earlier, and the need to proceed with caution. He wished the businesses that will reopen their doors for the first time in 19 months this Friday well and I concur with those remarks.

He also referred to the ambulance service and the unusual circumstance where an ambulance was sent from Galway to service an incident in Kilkee and the requirement to have a debate in this House on the National Ambulance Service, which has also been requested by other Members. It is something that we will seek to have in the near future.

Senator Craughwell raised the issue of the UN Security Council and said that words are just words. I agree with him. The UN Security Council has the potential to do great good but the veto limits its work, of which there is no doubt. A good example of where it did fine work was in response to the Ebola crisis when it passed a resolution to bring people together but one does not often find issues that unite everybody. The Senator eloquently pointed out the deficiencies in that. It is important that we use our time and our seat on the council to try to effect some good.

The Senator correctly pointed out the worsening condition for the rights of women and young girls in Afghanistan. The Taliban, just two days ago, stated that they would permit women to work where they were needed and that it would take time to get women and girls back to school. I believe we will be waiting a long time and that words are not going to encourage the Taliban to do anything differently this time around. We certainly need to see action on

that issue.

Senator Gavan proposed an amendment to the Order of Business regarding No. 19, which I will accept. This is the Safe Access to Termination of Pregnancy Services Bill 2021, which was put together for safety reasons, introduced by the Senator, and seconded by Senator Moynihan. I agree with the Senators on the need to progress this legislation and I have been told by the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, that his Department is also currently drafting legislation. We will all agree that it does not matter which Bill does this work as long as it gets done. Whichever happens more quickly is the best option. This is a commitment in the programme for Government. There was an expectation that the Bill would have advanced further when the Minister entered office but he has taken a great deal of advice on board, some of which is to say that it is not needed. He is clear in his commitment to get the legislation over the line. That is positive if the endgame is to get this over the line regardless of which way it happens. It is important that there are cross-party initiatives, which show that we have come a long way as a country on this front.

I take on board the remarks of Senator Mullen that there is a significant and different view out there. I respect this and we have had many debates, particularly at the Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution on this issue. There are different views on this but we respect each other's views. I understand the complexities in balancing free speech and the freedom to demonstrate and protest peacefully. That is a very delicate balancing act and I agree that we need to be careful on that front. I have no doubt that the Minister will strike the right balance in that regard.

Senator Wall sought a housing debate, in particular, on the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, being potentially a vehicle through which, in his own figures, 4,000 cost rental and 4,000 affordable houses could be provided. Certainly, if there is any other way of delivering more housing more quickly, we should look at it.

He also raised an interesting amnesty that Kildare County Council have put in place to take mattresses and sofas on a given day and on the level of uptake there was on that offer. The issue of illegal dumping is prevalent and widespread in the country.

Senator Gallagher raised the issue of the ongoing significant waiting lists for eye procedures, both inpatient and outpatient. The colossal waiting list for outpatient appointments of more than 41,000 is a scourge on the health system and on those people waiting for those procedures. I listened to Tony Canavan on the radio this morning where he said that the term "elective surgery" does not cover what it means to be on a waiting list. It may be elective but that does not mean that it is not urgent, necessary, or that the person is not living in considerable pain and suffering. It is important that we get those waiting lists down. In excess of €200 million was allocated in the budget specifically to deal with reducing those waiting lists across the board.

Senator Keogan raised the issue of media coverage and vaccines and she may have a slightly different view on vaccines. We need to encourage as many people as possible to take up the vaccines to try to protect everybody but not everybody will avail of that, as we know from the figures.

Senator Malcolm Byrne raised an issue and gave two examples. One was of Claire Byrne and Nigel Farage and the highlighting of the lack of knowledge of Irish history and the impor-

tance that it plays in politics to know the history of the country that one is speaking about. He also referred to David Puttnam who suggested that the knowledge of Irish history and politics among members of parliament in the UK was not as good as it could be. He suggested that it was something that we should take the initiative on on this side of the water to try to inform people a little better, and that we would all be the better for it, if I can put it that way. Senator Cummins raised a very important issue that I was not aware of. He mentioned a blockage facing people accessing the Rebuilding Ireland home loan while benefiting from the employment wage subsidy scheme. I will certainly ask the Minister to take a look at that. We will be seeking a debate on housing in the future in order to get an update on the progress of the Housing for All plan.

Senator Murphy proposed an amendment to the Order of Business relating to No. 20, the flooding Bill, which I will be accepting. I commend Senator Murphy. He has been working on this issue for a number of years now. In the last term, he was a really strong advocate for communities that face flooding every year. It is very distressing for families to watch their homes flood again and again. They cannot get insurance and it is really stressful. If we can bring legislation that would help people before the House, that is exactly what we should be doing. I look forward to that debate when it comes before the House.

Senator McGahon raised the issue of the digitisation of Irish society. He raised two issues he feels need to be addressed but was looking for advice not only from myself, but from the House, as to how best to progress some ideas he has. One of these ideas was that people should be able to withdraw cash using an ATM card loaded on their phones. That is a clever suggestion and probably the next step given that we have become so used to using our phones and not carrying a wallet, purse or anything of that nature. He also spoke about carrying hard copy identification and suggested that there should be a digital way to carry ID. That is again clever and progressive and something we should be looking at. It probably depends on the type of ID he is seeking to digitise. He would need to talk to different Departments but it is certainly a conversation we should be having. It is logical and it makes sense.

Senator Moynihan seconded the amendment proposed by Senator Gavan and also spoke about a chilling effect on GPs arising from those protests and demonstrations. Only 10% of GPs are providing these services and that is a very low figure. It is something we need to address. I am very keenly aware of a deficiency in many parts of rural Ireland. It is something we need to address. These services must be accessible to people without having to travel great distances. Otherwise, what is the point? We need to look at that. GPs have told us that they are worried about providing the services. In Roscommon, for example, there is only one GP providing them and she regularly has to pass demonstrations to get into her workplace. That is really not acceptable but all credit to her for continuing her work regardless of that extra stress.

Senator Paul Daly raised an issue regarding mixed vaccinations. I have had some issues helping people to get access. People who get one dose of vaccine administered in Ireland and another in the UK get their certificate where they receive the second vaccination. That is also a difficulty. I hope we will be a bit more open-minded about what we accept. We have to take care of our own citizens trying to get back into the country. It was really only by luck that the individual the Senator mentioned made it back for his father's funeral. It would have been unthinkable if he had not.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly referenced the issue of safe access zones. I know the Senator has been a very passionate advocate for this legislation and very supportive of the Together for

Safety campaign. She also referenced the strong commitment to women's health in the budget. That did not happen by chance. There was a great push for those changes in the last year, particularly from female Members of the Oireachtas. Now that we are increasing in number, albeit at a slower pace than we would like, we are finding our collective voice and we are working better together on those acute issues that are specific to women. She is right; between the roll-out of several menopause clinics across the country, free contraception for young girls and women, increased access to obstetrics and gynaecology and funding for the National Maternity Hospital, in excess of €30 million was allocated to women's health initiatives in this budget alone. That has never happened before. Between the advocacy of a number of female parliamentarians in the Oireachtas and the open-door policy of the Minister, who actually understands the need to invest in women's health, we have had a good team advocating for these issues across the board and we are now seeing the fruits of that advocacy, which is great.

Senator O'Sullivan very beautifully recited one of Máire Mhac an tSaoi's lovely poems. He paid great credit both to her and to Brendan Kennelly.

Senator Currie referenced the ongoing issue of the lack of substitute teachers for schools across the country. It is a problem and it is widespread. We need to find a better way of putting together panels and making sure that schools have access to substitute teachers because the nature of the job is that they are required at the last minute. Their use is not planned far in advance, or at least not for all absentees. In my own county of Mayo, I know there is a problem in getting supply teachers.

Senator Carrigy raised an issue regarding the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB. We have all dealt with issues, at some stage or another, we thought the RTB would be able to assist with only to find it did not have the powers or scope to do so. It is important that we help property owners. Access to the courts is fine but it can be quite an expensive route to take and is not open to everybody because of the cost involved or the fear that one will not be able to afford it. We all should be able to have our rights vindicated and protected and have our property protected, so the need for the RTB to step up in that regard is certainly required. Perhaps a Commencement matter to the relevant Minister might start the ball rolling on that discussion.

Senator Ahearn raised the issue of the digital Covid certificate and welcomed that they would be extended into February of next year and possibly beyond that. It was one thing that, at the outset, we required digital Covid certificates when we had not offered everybody a vaccine and those who had not been offered one were the very ones who were working in hospitality, so you could work in hospitality unvaccinated but you not participate, which I had a difficult with because I thought it was not the right call, whereas now everybody has been offered a vaccine, so if you have not taken one through choice, and not because you cannot, because some people cannot, then there should be no apology made for requesting a vaccine cert to make sure everybody is kept as safe as possible. It is the right balance to strike in terms of protecting everybody's rights and ensuring businesses can stay open and people can socialise safely. The Senator rightly pointed out we would not see the numbers lifting for weddings and nightclubs opening if that system was not in place and were it not for the high levels of vaccination we have, thankfully, but we still have a way to go on that.

Senator Ahearn said 22 October is International Stuttering Awareness Day.

Senator Garret Ahearn: That is correct.

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Senator Lisa Chambers: The Senator said that the representatives of the organisation will be in Buswells Hotel tomorrow from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m. for anyone who is available to pop along to show their support. It is very important for us to support those awareness campaigns.

Senator Mullen paid tribute to Máire Mhac an tSaoi and Brendan Kennelly. I also responded to the issues the Senator raised about the Bill proposed by Senator Gavan.

Senator Ward finished off the Order of Business by drawing attention to the Speak Out facility that has been launched by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, which allows for the online, anonymous reporting of sexual assault, harassment and other violence against people in third level institutions. I will be honest and say that I am not fully up to speed on all of details of how that would work, but it might be welcome to have the Minister in at some stage to talk to us about that, how it would work in terms of anonymous reporting, and the procedures to follow up on that. It is a welcome step, and anything we can do to make our campuses a safer place for everybody, both men and women, is very welcome. Certainly, if it works in those settings, there is no reason it could not be extended across the board. It is a very welcome initiative and I look forward to hearing more about it from the Minister. That concludes the Order of Business.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Paul Gavan has moved an amendment to the Order of Business: “That No. 19 be taken before No. 1.” The Deputy Leader has indicated she is prepared to accept the amendment. Is the amendment agreed? Agreed.

Senator Eugene Murphy has moved an amendment to the Order of Business: “That No. 20 be taken before No. 1.” Senator Paul Daly has seconded the amendment. The Deputy Leader has indicated she is willing to accept the amendment. Is the amendment agreed? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

Safe Access to Termination of Pregnancy Services Bill 2021: First Stage

Senator Paul Gavan: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to protect the free and unencumbered access to facilities providing legal termination of pregnancy services; protect individuals providing or facilitating legal termination of pregnancy services from harassment; and to provide for matters connected therewith.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Senator Paul Gavan: Next Tuesday.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Tuesday, 26 October 2021.

Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage

Senator Eugene Murphy: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to reduce restrictions on the power of the Electricity Supply Board to carry out works concerning the levels on the Shannon Lakes (Lough Derg, Lough Ree and Lough Allen), for this purpose to amend the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 1934; and to provide for related matters.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Senator Paul Gavan: Next Tuesday.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Tuesday, 26 October 2021.

Sitting suspended at 4.43 p.m. and resumed at 5 p.m.

5 o'clock

Sláintecare Implementation: Statements

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, for this important debate on Sláintecare, which many Members have been involved in since the previous Oireachtas term.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I thank Members for the opportunity to meet with them this evening. We are here to discuss what I believe is one of the most important projects of our time, which is to make universal healthcare a reality in our country and to have a public healthcare system that provides girls and boys, women and men, with great healthcare when they need it. We allocate a great deal of money to healthcare. We have incredible healthcare workers doing extraordinary work every day. We have wide political agreement that universal healthcare must happen, but let us be honest, there is a long way to travel. Even with the intense pressures Covid-19 brings, our healthcare workers are keeping critical health services going and they deserve immense credit for that, but many children and adults are waiting far too long to see a consultant or to get a scan or to have a procedure. In one of the wealthiest countries on earth, this is completely unacceptable. As I have said in the Dáil and as I have said at the Joint Committee on Health, the Government and myself are absolutely committed to the goal of universal healthcare in our country.

This year has already seen a very significant investment of more than €1.2 billion in new initiatives. We are on track, or on track with minor issues, on more than 97% of the projects tracked under the Sláintecare implementation strategy. Increased investment in the health service has allowed us to increase capacity, which is fundamental to improving access to care. Hospital bed capacity has increased significantly. Approximately 850 permanent beds have been added to the hospital system this year and more will be added by the end of the year. This is the single greatest increase in hospital beds in any one year. Some €52 million was provided

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this year to increase critical care capacity and we have delivered a record increase in critical care beds from 255 to a planned 321 by the end of the year, or very early next year. This represents an increase of more than 25% in our national critical care capacity in less than two years. There are 6,000 more staff working in the health service than there were last summer, including almost 1,400 more nurses and midwives and 1,200 health and social care professionals. These staff were hired at the same time that we hired thousands of other professionals to help us with testing and tracing and rolling out the vaccine programme.

Various initiatives and reforms are ensuring that people are receiving care closer to home. A total of €25 million was allocated to our GP access to diagnostics initiative this year. It allows GPs in a community-based setting to refer patients directly for diagnostic scans, such as X-rays and MRIs. I am delighted to inform the House that an estimated 140,000 additional scans will be carried out by the end of the year as a result of this programme.

Waiting lists for funding approvals for home care have seen a real reduction, thanks to a large increase in funding. This is delivering on the objective to keep people well at home and out of hospital or have them discharged from hospital as quickly as possible.

Prevention is an important component of modern healthcare. I am looking forward to launching the new healthy communities programme in Darndale tomorrow, which aims to improve the long-term health and well-being of people living in 19 communities across the country.

All the progress we have made has been achieved while dealing with the worst public health crisis in the history of the State. We now want to build on the investment and progress made so far this year. I am delighted that budget 2022 reiterates and reinforces the commitment to universal healthcare. The allocation of €22.4 billion, the largest ever investment in Ireland's health and social care services, will reduce waiting lists, increase capacity, protect our most vulnerable, address inequalities and deliver the right care in the right place and at the right time.

Tackling waiting lists is my number one priority. Waiting times were unacceptable before the Covid crisis and have worsened since. Many people right across the country are living in pain, some of them in agony. The long waits that many people face to access care are causing immense distress. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, are finalising a multi-annual plan that will set out a twin-track approach of investment and reform. It will be overseen by a ministerial task force, following the vaccine task force model that has worked so well, and will include a number of short, medium and long-term actions. The short-term actions are already being implemented as part of the short-term waiting lists plan for this year. Next year, we have allocated €350 million to this approach to tackling waiting lists. Addressing waiting times will also require significant investment in elective care. A proposal for three elective hospitals, which will focus on planned care, has been completed and is being evaluated by my Department.

Universal healthcare must mean higher quality healthcare. There is a lot of focus, very understandably, on access. The general narrative is that sometimes it can be very hard to access our public system but, when one does, the care is excellent. In the vast majority of cases, that is certainly correct. We must continue to invest in supporting our clinicians, in innovation to make things better, and in offering more choice to parents and ensuring there is consistently high-quality care throughout the country. One of the main routes to achieving this is via our clinical strategies, including for maternity care, cancer care, trauma, mental health provision and many more excellent strategies. The problem is that those strategies have not, for some

time, had the level of funding they need. This year, for the first time in many years, the national strategies were fully funded and the progress is evident to see. I am delighted to be delivering a further €62 million in new development funding for our national clinical strategies in the budget for next year. We are going to build on the progress that has been achieved thus far this year.

Other new funding for next year includes €45 million to advance the objective that care be accessible and affordable for the most vulnerable. There is €31 million for women's health measures. As I have said before, women's health must be, and is, a top priority for the Government. We have included a broad package of healthcare measures to this end in the budget for next year, building on the progress made so far in 2021. There is €37 million for a range of measures to deliver safe, quality and patient-centred care. We have allocated €30 million in additional funding for health services for older people. There is €65 million in new funding for disability services, on top of which we have a €10 million once-off funding stream for Covid-19. We have allocated €24 million for mental health services. There is an additional €11 million for another 19 critical care beds, which will bring our total critical care capacity to 340 beds by the end of next year. I have Government agreement to keep pushing on after that to bring us up to the level of critical care capacity we need. In addition, there is €9 million to fund accessible contraception for women. We are starting with those aged 17 to 25, the intention being that we move beyond that thereafter.

In spite of all this progress, we need to be honest that serious challenges remain to be faced. As colleagues are aware, three of the 112 Sláintecare projects were reported as having significant challenges. One of these is tackling waiting lists, which I have discussed. Another challenge is the implementation of regional health areas, RHAs. There has been progress on this in recent months. We have had research into international best practice and policy options have been drafted. Consultation has taken place with stakeholders, including patients, clinicians, policymakers, hospital groups and community healthcare organisations, CHOs, and further consultation is planned in the coming weeks. I am establishing an advisory group on this issue. We must ensure we arrive at a structure that works, first and foremost, for patients, while also working for the people employed in our healthcare system.

Our public health system is not where we need it to be when it comes to e-health, which is the third of the three Sláintecare projects that were deemed to have significant issues. There must be much more progress in this area. That progress was negatively impacted by the need to prioritise ICT and e-health resources in support of the pandemic response and recovery from the recent cyberattack, but it would be wrong to solely blame those issues for where we are on e-health. Nevertheless, there has been some very encouraging progress in the past 18 months. Many of the initiatives that were introduced in response to the Covid crisis, and the necessary measures to adapt to it, will stay in place after the pandemic to support a wider agenda. It is anticipated that the next report will reflect a shift towards business as usual for e-health as the impact of the pandemic and cyberattack starts to recede.

When I spoke recently at the joint committee, I noted that there would be some changes to governance structures. A new programme board co-chaired by my Secretary General and the head of the HSE, and comprising other members of our senior teams, is being constituted and will have its first meeting in the near future. This new board will ensure that there is high-level accountability for implementation and that the drive for universal healthcare is fully embedded in both the Department of Health and the HSE. This is a really important and ambitious project. The concept is fairly straightforward, namely, the delivery of high-quality care when it is needed. Getting there is not so straightforward and achieving it requires that there be full

ownership by the senior teams right across the healthcare community. Access to high-quality healthcare when it is needed cannot, and must not, be a privilege for those who can afford it. It must be available to every girl, boy, woman and man regardless of how much money they, or their parents, have. That is what universal healthcare means, that is what must be delivered and that is my absolute focus in healthcare.

Senator Fiona O’Loughlin: I welcome this opportunity to discuss the Sláintecare plan. I thank the Minister for his time. One of the first things he did in his opening remarks was to talk about our incredible healthcare workers doing extraordinary work every day. We can never forget that. We have seen that day in and day out over the last 18 months and we must never lose an opportunity to pay tribute to all those healthcare workers.

Moving on to respond to some of his other opening remarks, the Minister spoke about the significant investment of more than €1.2 billion in new initiatives. In the year of the pandemic, when so many resources and so much finance had to be devoted to trying to fight this virus, it is incredible that the Minister has been able to commit finance and time and effort to new initiatives. It is welcome. The roll-out of Patisiran is one of those initiatives. I took up with the Minister personally and raised here the case of Mr. Pat Tinsley, someone I know well and who is a good friend. I refer to the impact of amyloidosis on his health. Having learned so much more about that awful disease and how it impacted Mr. Tinsley, and his peers, I thank the Minister for making a difference in so many lives. I also thank him for his absolute commitment to women’s healthcare and the provision of €31 million to roll out initiatives in women’s healthcare. The Minister has truly put a focus on this aspect of healthcare that has never been put on it before.

My colleagues and I on this side of the House fully support the ongoing policy and financial commitment to the Sláintecare plan. Its implementation is a priority for all of us in Fianna Fáil and, therefore, it is a priority for the Minister and for the Government. Implementation of the programme will certainly result in the largest overhaul of our health system since the foundation of the State. It is a long-term process and it requires adequate planning. Increasing and improving healthcare capacity is a prime focus for us. We were all concerned about the resignations of Ms Laura Magahy, the former executive director, and Professor Tom Keane from the Sláintecare Implementation Advisory Council, SIAC. We must take on board the criticisms levelled by them concerning the operation of SIAC. We must acknowledge that we have heard them loud and clear. It is important that the Minister has committed to setting up a new and more focused group which will advise on regional structures. It is excellent that some members of the original group have agreed to join the new group.

The Minister said that tackling waiting lists is his number one priority. It is important to acknowledge that people are living in pain and distress. In this regard, the Minister is putting together a ministerial task force that will follow the model of the vaccine task force, which worked so well. It is also important that short-, medium- and long-term actions will be undertaken. I acknowledge the substantial work already undertaken in recent months to progress regional health areas. We cannot forget the objective of Sláintecare, which is to deliver universal healthcare “to every girl, boy, woman and man” in this country. That has never been achieved. We have come a long way, and budget 2022 has highlighted the progress we have made in the Government’s commitment to progressing and transforming the healthcare system.

We are moving in the right direction. The issues highlighted regarding Sláintecare must be dealt with quickly and effectively. Delivery on this is our number one priority. In taking stock of where we are, the Government is making progress in health. The Fianna Fáil Seanad group

fully supports the Government and the Sláintecare initiative. We want to see the issues within the implementation council addressed and we must ensure that service delivery and patient welfare remain at the heart of everything we do.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber again. The only question that occurs to me is to ask if we are really going to do this now. As we face into our second winter with Covid-19, and when we have just kicked the reopening ball down the road again, we are revisiting a ten-year-old promise from Fine Gael and the Labour Party to solve the problems in the public health sector by eliminating the private health sector.

In November 2015, we were told that Sláintecare had been put on hold due to the Department of Health finding that universal health insurance would lead to expenditure that was approximately 11% higher than the existing system. Two years later, a committee gave us the slogan that, “A universal healthcare system will provide population, promotive, preventative, primary, curative, rehabilitative and palliative health and social care services to the entire population of Ireland, ensuring timely access to quality, effective, integrated services on the basis of clinical need”. That is a lovely-sounding mission statement to be sure, but unless we can sell it for €3 billion, it brings us no closer to delivering universal healthcare.

Four years on, we are still talking about it because the head honchos finally realise that the requirements for implementing this programme are seriously lacking. It is doomed to fail and it simply will not happen. We do not need Sláintecare to get moving on the real and pressing issues with our healthcare system. Some regions are experiencing one in five permanent consultant posts being left unfilled, yet the HSE is cutting 350 junior doctor positions that were provided last year to fight the pandemic. Nursing staffing levels dropped by more than 3,000 from 2007 to 2017. However, the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland accepts less than 10% of work applications from American nurses. Policies and structures in place are exacerbating these problems and not alleviating them. The Minister and the Department do not need to implement Sláintecare to fix them, yet we are discussing this pie-in-the-sky promise rather than simple and practical solutions.

What a time to resurrect it. We have just been told that Friday’s D-Day has gone up in smoke and the Government has again foisted the blame and the burden on the people of this country rather than recognising its failure to prepare, adapt and react. On 16 July, the Minister told this House that, “The second-best scenario from NPHEP now shows that over 200 people would be in ICU in just a few months’ time”. There are now 74 cases in intensive care units, ICUs. We are not even being told how many of those patients are in ICU due to Covid-19 and how many are there for other reasons but have tested positive for Covid-19. The narrative is that ICUs and hospitals are going to be overrun if we do not continue certain Covid-19 measures. This is not exactly a new tune, is it?

It has been 16 months since it was said that we had two weeks to flatten the curve. It seems like a lifetime ago, so I will not blame people for not remembering. The deal was that the people of this country would put their lives on hold for a few weeks and, in return, the Government would put in place the necessary healthcare infrastructure and bolster the capacity necessary to accommodate those falling ill due to the virus. That never happened. Precious little was done. Lockdowns and mandates were instead used as blunt instruments to suppress case numbers. Once again, the ordinary people of Ireland were made responsible for the Government’s remit.

It is not like it could not have been done. Sweden doubled its ICU capacity to tackle the

pandemic, with the number of ICU beds in its capital quadrupling. New equipment was ordered and there was a scramble to retrieve old ventilators from basements and emergency reserves. Anaesthetic machines and ventilators were borrowed from private caregivers. All non-essential administrative work was scrapped for staff so they would have more time to look after patients. Volunteers were drafted in, as were staff from other regions less affected by the outbreak of the pandemic and staff from private caregivers in Stockholm. In short, the Swedish authorities reacted accordingly and did their job. How many ICU beds did we get in the last winter plan? It was 17.

Let us be clear. This is not a Covid-19 issue. For those who can remember, the trolley crisis loomed large for some time before the pandemic. There were nearly 100,000 people on trolleys in 2017. The following year, 2018, was the worst year for hospital overcrowding according to the INMO and it was the same in 2019, long before Covid existed. Any pressure on the healthcare system is not due to a minority of people who have opted not to receive a vaccine. It is due to poor policy, stagnated decision-making and a Health Service Executive mired in bureaucracy.

Nothing exemplifies that more than these lateral flow test kits, more commonly known as antigen tests, first mentioned in this House by me in July 2020 and obstinately ignored by our NPHE overlord who refused to sanction antigen testing for staff, visitors and residents in hospitals and nursing homes even though it might have identified some of the outbreaks earlier. Now, finally, 15 months after their use first being mooted in the Seanad by me, the Government has announced it is considering using them, seven months after the UK. Antigen tests need to be used. In the UK these are handed out in pharmacies free to everyone. Today the Government is only making these available to people who are vaccinated. People who are not vaccinated cannot avail of them, which is ridiculous.

Senator Martin Conway: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, to the House. He is always very welcome here. I know he has had a long day and a busy few days. We had a very good engagement on the future of Sláintecare at the Joint Committee on Health. I have no doubt about the commitment of the Minister, the Secretary General of his Department and the HSE to Sláintecare. We need to be realistic to some extent. We have just been through the worst pandemic in living memory. There have been many achievements with Sláintecare. Along with everyone else, I pay tribute to Laura Magahy for her leadership and what she achieved with Sláintecare. I also pay tribute to Professor Tom Keane, not just for what he achieved with Sláintecare but also for what he has achieved in healthcare in this country, particularly the cancer strategy.

At this stage we need to move the project on to delivery. I know the Minister is committed to that, as we all are. Universal healthcare is great and we all support it. However, I do not think universal healthcare is a priority for multimillionaires who can afford to pay for their healthcare. In the first instance, the money needs to go to the lower levels in society who need most. The very last tier to benefit from universal healthcare should be the wealthiest people in our society. That is where I am coming from on universal healthcare. To be fair, most of the very well-off people in society would agree that they can afford to pay for their healthcare, and if they can afford to do so, they should.

Regarding what has been achieved with the Sláintecare model, for too long healthcare has been a political football. It is a political issue but it should not be a political football. We should all be working in unison to achieve the type of healthcare we can stand over. As the Minister

has said, we have a long way to go, but we are moving in the right direction. I welcome that €22.5 billion has been allocated to healthcare this year up from €17 billion or €18 billion three or four years ago. When the Minister was Opposition spokesperson on health, he rightly carried out many forensic analyses of healthcare at the Joint Committee on Health. I know he would expect nothing less of anyone in this House but to adopt the same policy in forensically analysing all the decisions he makes to ensure they achieve what he and everyone else wants them to achieve.

I acknowledge the Minister's stewardship of the pandemic since he took up office in July 2020. It has not been easy; it has been difficult. It is much easier to close places down than to open up. I welcome this morning's announcements.

I wish to make a few points as we face into the winter plan, which I welcome. We have achieved enormous success in the vaccination programme, with 92% of the population fully vaccinated against Covid-19. I spoke today on the Order of Business on this issue. I am still concerned that we are still charging people for the flu vaccine, which seems to be penny wise and pound foolish. The flu vaccine should be available to every member of the population free of charge. In fact, we should be running the same campaigns as we have been running for Covid to encourage people to take the flu vaccine. The Minister knows the situation in Limerick and Galway at the moment - not a bed is available and people are on trolleys.

Let us do what we can at the start by encouraging people to take the vaccine by not charging for it. I would go a step further and say we should not be charging for any vaccine. I welcome the commitment the Minister gave to me through the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, in a Commencement debate on the HPV vaccine. It is shocking to think we have been charging between €400 and €600 to people who wanted to catch up and get their children vaccinated against HPV. I welcome the announcement the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, made here in recent weeks that the Government would eliminate those charges. In his summing up, I ask the Minister to give a timeline for when this will happen. I know Laura Brennan's family is anxious, as I am and everyone else is, to know when this policy initiative will be activated.

We have come a long way with health. I want to finish on a positive note which I think is appropriate. We have allocated €22.5 billion to healthcare this year. Most people in society are happy to forgo tax cuts to see money invested in health. We have an obligation to look after the health of our people. I wish the Minister well in his job. Why can we not make the flu vaccine available to everybody for free? When will he eliminate the €400 to €600 charge for the catch-up programme for HPV vaccination, as committed to in this House by the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte?

Senator Paul Gavan: It is nice to see the Minister here and I thank him for coming to the House. I think we can agree this is a difficult topic. I have real concerns over where we stand with Sláintecare. When three of the most senior people on the advisory implementation council resign and say they are resigning because they do not believe the Government is committed to implementing Sláintecare, that is a major problem. Deputy Shortall put it best when she said the Minister's dropping of the advisory implementation council amounted to a hostile takeover, effectively shooting the messenger because people have pointed out that the commitment to Sláintecare - a public system of care and a national health service, if you like - has not been seen in practice. Certainly, in his speech this evening, the Minister has not addressed the issue as to what mistakes were made that led to these people giving up hope and resigning their positions. I ask him to address that and his response.

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I want to put this in context. I accept what Senator O’Loughlin said earlier that these things take time. Health services do not mend themselves overnight. Sláintecare is five years old. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been putting together budgets for some time. I believe this is their sixth one in a row. We are now five years into the implementation of Sláintecare and surely to God we should have made more progress than we have.

I am particularly struck by the concerns expressed by one of those who resigned over the Minister’s commitment to implementing regional structures. Laura Magahy described those structures as a critical enabler. In fairness to the Minister, he addressed it in his speech. However, I am concerned about what he said about implementing regional structures. He said that substantial work is also ongoing on implementing regional health areas. He then went on to describe a number of actions that really just look like further research options. The term he used was implementing regional health areas. Here is an easy one for the Minister to come back on. When are these areas going to be implemented? Will he simply tell us when? That would be progress. A simple answer would suffice.

I have great concerns about those on the front line. I speak as someone who used to represent health workers in University Hospital Limerick, UHL. I met with union officials only the week before last and they told me that morale was absolutely on the floor. Why would it not be? The Minister will be aware that, as hospital management conceded to me, UHL is 200 beds short. There were 90 people on trolleys last Wednesday. We are in the tenth year of Fine Gael government and, each year, things have gotten worse rather than better in the hospital. I include in that the six or so years in which we have had budgets from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael together. That is why the INMO said: “Many of my colleagues across the country are feeling utterly unsupported in their workplace, with no sense that much-needed health service reforms are supported by Government.” The Minister can criticise Sinn Féin if he likes, which the Government parties like to do, but will he address the real concerns expressed by front-line workers? He might also consider the SIPTU representative in Tralee who told us there is now one nurse for every 15 patients there. There is a massive problem.

The problem is that there is a revolving door as regards health staff. People cannot cope with the appalling circumstances they are being asked to work in. Fine Gael has had ten years to address this but has failed utterly while Fianna Fáil is on its sixth budget but it has failed utterly as well. There is an ideological issue at the heart of this. Let us be frank: for decades, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were committed not to a public healthcare system, but to a two-tier system. That is what they defended. We never had the radical change after the Second World War that social democracy could bring because we never had a social democratic government. I do not see commitment from the Government in practice. The workers on the front line in UHL do not see or feel that commitment either. They do not have any confidence in this Government.

We spoke to staff in the National Ambulance Service, who came up with several good suggestions to divert people so they would not all have to end up in the emergency department. Its representatives told us of their frustrations as regards getting these policies implemented and of their concerns over their own staffing needs. I acknowledge that a review is under way in that regard.

To conclude, the Minister is not delivering. Those are not my words but those of the front-line workers I have met and quoted here this evening. The next time he comes before the House, there will need to have been some fundamental change. Fundamentally, the Government is not working towards a national public health service. That is evident for everyone to see.

Senator Rebecca Moynihan: I thank the Minister for coming in and I thank the Leader for facilitating this debate on Sláintecare. She had indicated that it would also be a wider debate on health and the health service. Health is a perennial issue in politics and, despite massive increases in health spending over the past 20 years, it is difficult to see the impact of this money or where it has gone. In a spending review conducted last year, it was determined that an additional €324 million would be needed in 2022 just to keep the health service running as it is. As Senator Gavan said, half of the issue is the significant turnover in staff among nurses, consultants and GPs. There is great difficulty recruiting them. Staff are not being retained within the health service because people are under such pressure.

Sláintecare was developed on a cross-party basis with the aim of reforming the system, ending the complicated two-tier system we have and ensuring that waiting lists and access to treatment were based on need rather than ability to pay. It is a laudable concept that the Labour Party is fully supportive of. It was never going to be easy and it is not now, particularly as three key members of the implementation group have resigned in recent months. Sláintecare needs both dedicated funding and political leadership. It needs to be driven and not just left to fall apart. There has been a sense in the past few months that Sláintecare is directionless and lacks advocates at governmental and administrative levels, where such advocates are needed.

My colleague, Deputy Duncan Smith, said that the setting up of a separate group to advise on the regionalisation aspect of Sláintecare is not in the spirit of achieving the aim of full system reform. It was the leader of the Minister's party, when he was Minister for Health and Children, who initially abolished those regional assemblies under the reform programme and the Hanly report. Despite this, we are now going back to that system and this Fianna Fáil Government is setting up a dedicated unit to have a look at just that rather than at the systemic reform needed. There is political support for Sláintecare but we need political will at the governmental and administrative levels to ensure its success.

With the indulgence of the Leas-Chathaoirleach, I will highlight another matter relating to healthcare, as the Leader has said this is to be a wider debate on the health service. I refer to the ownership of the national maternity hospital and the need to ensure the ethos of that hospital is secular and based on need and that it provides all of the services we need, given the investment the State is making in it. We need guarantees that there will be no religious ethos attached to the hospital. In the context of the protest for better maternity care, I find it quite striking that, even though the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health have said that they want to allow partners in, local decision-making has differed significantly from that sentiment. It raises questions as to who is control of the health service and health system. It would be an enormous missed opportunity - and it is a once-in-a-generation opportunity - to allow the St. Vincent's Healthcare Group to be behind the new national maternity hospital, although it is badly needed and is being built on a site that allows for co-location with another hospital. That presents a great danger. When we founded our health and education systems, we did not do it on a State basis such as can be seen in the creation of the National Health Service in the UK. Instead we essentially subcontracted these systems to the church. We are doing that again in this case. In building the new national maternity hospital, it is important that we ensure that it is State-led and secular and that it provides all of the services that people in maternity hospitals may need, including trans healthcare services, abortion services and reproductive health services. I cannot overemphasise how important that is.

Senator Frances Black: I wish the Minister a good evening. He is very welcome to the Chamber. I thank him for taking the time to be here with us. I can imagine how busy he has

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been. It has been an incredibly challenging 18 months for all parties. There is no doubt about that. I acknowledge the Trojan efforts of the Department, the health service and NPHE to keep us all in good health throughout this pandemic. The roll-out of the vaccination programme is an area of particular success. Ireland's place at the top of international vaccination tables is a testament to this good work and to the commitment of the people to keeping one another safe. The pandemic has placed great additional pressure on the Department and the health service, as evidenced by the number of people with Covid-19 in hospitals and ICUs and the number of people awaiting treatment on waiting lists at present. It is important that, over the coming weeks and months, we remain vigilant and mindful of one another. Doing so will ensure our hospitals have the capacity to provide the services required by their patients throughout this next phase of the pandemic. I must give a big shout-out to our front-line workers, who are just incredible. I am proud that they have done such a phenomenal job.

Our health service is in need of significant reform. This was also the case before the pandemic. The pandemic has forced some of our systems to modernise and become more streamlined but significant deficiencies remain. Our hospitals struggle with capacity each winter. There seem to be accounts of individuals being treated on trolleys in hospital corridors every year. I have seen it with my own eyes when my sister was taken into hospital. It was like a war zone. It was scary and frightening. Our waiting lists for treatment remain some of the longest in Europe, with individuals waiting years for critical health interventions and support. While the pandemic has indeed placed a significant additional strain on the health system, its reformation simply cannot wait any longer. The implementation of Sláintecare is critical to this reform and to the creation of a health service which is fair, equitable and efficient. While I understand that progress has been made in many areas of the implementation plan, I am concerned that three key elements have not yet progressed to a significant extent, namely, the re-establishment of regional health areas, the tackling of hospital waiting lists and the development of the e-health programme. Progress in other areas will be held back by the slow pace of progress in these areas, and the current system, which is inefficient and discriminatory, will be maintained. The slow pace of progress in these areas was named by Laura Magahy as a significant concern in her resignation as executive director of Sláintecare in early September. I must say that I was most concerned to learn of her resignation. This was compounded by the resignation of Professor Keane and, subsequently, Professor O'Connor from the Sláintecare implementation advisory council. I do not want to be an alarmist, but if senior officials involved in the implementation of Sláintecare do not have confidence in its progress, it is cause for concern.

I welcome the fact that the Department has been working on a new delivery mechanism for Sláintecare in recent weeks. However, I would like some assurances from the Minister of State on what the mechanism specifically entails, and detail on who will hold it to account and when we might see progress in the three key areas of regionalisation, reducing waiting lists and developing e-health. It is also important that the progress of Sláintecare is not tied to the day-to-day management of the health service. I understand that the pandemic poses a once-in-a-generation challenge for the Department and the health service in this regard, but Sláintecare must be progressed so that the system is better prepared for any future public health emergencies.

We must engage in long-term thinking, planning and strategising in political decision-making in Ireland. The difficult decisions must be made now to ensure we do not need to make difficult decisions in future. We cannot continue to kick the can down the road. The pandemic provides a justification for doing so, but we cannot abandon long-term planning for what is an undefined period of time. The public health emergency will end at some point in the future, but

we must ensure it does not leave another public health emergency in its wake in the form of an inefficient, two-tier health system that is stretched beyond its capacity. I know that the Minister of State is working to prevent this, but we need to hear more regarding the specific strategies and mechanisms that are being put in place to ensure we achieve a fair, equitable and efficient universal health system in Ireland in the not too distant future.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is í an chéad chainteoir eile ná an Seanadóir Mac Giolla Phádraig. An féidir le Seanadóirí a bheith an-chúramach leis an am? Munar féidir, ní bheimid in ann gach duine a thógáil isteach. Bígí an-chúramach leis an am, le bhur dtoil.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to speak about Sláintecare. It is a most important initiative, and one that has been talked about for a long time. We all support the concept of universal healthcare being provided to people based on their medical need and not just on their ability to pay for that medical care. For our party, it is intrinsic and a priority. We campaigned very strongly on the issue in the election of 2020, and made a very firm commitment that we would introduce and ensure full implementation of Sláintecare were we to have the opportunity to serve the people of our country. That is what the Minister of State and the other Ministers at the Department of Health are dedicating themselves to doing.

We have talked about other individuals. However, it is most important, as we have this discussion today, that we all remember that there are more than 70,000 people working in our health service. They are all providing an input and working not just to care for people's immediate medical needs, but to ensure that universal healthcare will be available in the future. It would be wrong for any of us to take away from that fact. They have come through and served all of us during the pandemic. Fearlessly, they have put their own lives and families at risk. They have done all of that based on their determination and sense of public duty. We all owe them a great debt of gratitude. Everybody has played their part in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been a once-in-a-century event. Everyone who has been involved in achieving the greatest response in terms of public health, the roll-out of the vaccination programme and testing and tracing has served all of us.

On top of that, in parallel, the Government has managed to make progress with Sláintecare. I believe €1.2 billion has been provided for new initiatives in the course of the last year. A budget in excess of €20 billion has been secured for next year. The sustainable funding of those 70,000-odd front-line workers and healthcare professionals is most important. It is encouraging to see it. Let us deal with the facts. The mid-year review of Sláintecare showed that 109 of 112 identified actions have been progressed, have been completed or are on track to be delivered. The Government has been in place for one year. I am sure that nobody in the Department of Health or the HSE is sitting on their laurels. Everybody must be exhausted after the year we have had. The progress made is an achievement and all those involved must be commended on it.

My party supports the Government's objectives of reducing waiting lists, increasing capacity and delivering the right care at the right time. It would be honest for the Opposition to remind themselves or at least acknowledge that when it comes to talking about waiting lists, there is nobody in this Republic who thinks the waiting lists are acceptable. Nobody believes that those in pain or in need of medical care should have to wait. The Opposition party that talks about waiting lists in this jurisdiction, when they are double *per capita* in the jurisdiction where it is actually in government, is pushing its luck.

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In terms of budget 2022, I wish to commend the Minister of State on the disability budget. Next year, the budget for disability services will be €2.2 billion. The Minister of State has managed to achieve a 92% reduction in the waiting lists for assessment of needs, particularly for young children, which is an issue that is close to my heart. That is tremendous and an historic achievement. All those involved should be congratulated. I hope that next year we will see even further progress in this area. It is that type of progress that makes universal healthcare become a reality for people. When people can access health services that they need when they need them, it makes a difference.

The €1.1 billion provided for mental health services and the €2.3 billion provided for older people in budget 2022 are most welcome. The Government has introduced initiatives in terms of trying to help people who are on low incomes to access healthcare when they need it, including the extension of the provision of free medical care to six- and seven-year-olds, the extension of the provision of dental services to medical card holders and the reduction in the drugs payment scheme threshold. We all know that the job is not done, but it is going in the right direction. We must encourage all those involved in the Sláintecare project. It is ambitious, radical and game-changing. However, we must not forget that our health service has been in place for decades. The change, which I absolutely believe will be achieved, will also include the prioritisation of women's health. That is an issue that is important to my party and to the Minister of State. Initiatives have been taken on ending period poverty, focusing on menopause and endometriosis and providing free contraception, which are issues that are intrinsic to women.

Finally, I ask the Minister of State to take an interest in the extension of the Rotunda Hospital. It is awaiting the approval of a design team for its critical care unit, in the west wing. It would be great if the Minister of State could bring us some good news on that issue.

Senator Seán Kyne: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber and thank the Minister for Health for attending the previous session. First, I wish to acknowledge the increased budget for health this year, with the provision of some €22 billion, including the retention of €4 billion in funding that was committed during the pandemic in 2020.

On the issue of critical care beds, I welcome the €10.5 million that has been allocated to provide an additional 19 critical care beds, bringing the total number of critical care beds to 340, in line with the 2018 health capacity review. That is most important. Some of the highlights of budget 2022 include the provision of €250 million to reduce acute hospital and community waiting lists, and in the Minister of State's area, the provision of €65 million in new funding for disability services.

6 o'clock

The focus is to be on the 1,700 young pupils who will be leaving school and looking for services. There is also to be a focus on nursing homes and the provision of better accommodation. There is new funding for mental health services and there is to be accessible contraception for women. All these measures are positive aspects of the budget for the coming year and for the roll-out of Sláintecare.

It is good to be addressing a Minister of State from Galway. I am sure she is very aware of many of the issues that exist there. I want to recount a story with which she is very familiar, namely, that of our emergency department. I was in the hospital today, as it happens, with my wife. I took a picture of the works that are progressing in the temporary emergency depart-

ment. A colleague of mine who spoke to a nurse there in recent weeks learned that the nurse is at her wit's end. So are her colleagues. This is evident from the resignation of four emergency department nurses in recent weeks. The nurse my colleague spoke to said Galway is a centre of excellence. On paper, it is. While the staff do a tremendous job, the facility, both physically and spatially, is not at the races by comparison with what is evident in other parts of the country. A Portakabin is the entrance to the emergency department. While there is to be a temporary emergency department during the building works, it is likely that it will be in place for five to six years, assuming we get the planning application lodged for the emergency department, not to mention proceeding to detailed design and construction. The nurse to whom my colleague spoke felt Galway has been forgotten. Being in government, I do not like saying that. Pressure must continue to be exerted to ensure that the planning application for the emergency department is lodged. There seems to be an assumption that we are going to get planning permission. I hope we will, but we have a long history in Galway of projects that were not granted planning permission. I hope that will not be the case here.

The other matter I would like to talk about is the great need for inpatient beds in Galway. The Minister for Health appeared before the health committee two weeks ago tomorrow and was due to bring a memorandum to the Cabinet the next day regarding the elective hospitals. That did not happen. I am not sure whether it was deferred. I am sure the Minister of State is not in a position to say, or perhaps cannot. Saolta has indicated that we need new inpatient beds. Will they be provided? Are we going to get inpatient beds as part of an elective hospital? We need them. Senior Saolta executives were shocked by the Sláintecare team's proposal that only day beds would be provided in Galway. We need way more than that. The announcement was not what we expected. Any and all developments and investments in Galway are welcomed but inpatient beds are needed there, as part of the elective hospital or in conjunction with it. That is not provided for in the national development plan. The elective hospitals are provided for, but there is no mention of additional inpatient beds for Galway. It tends to be forgotten that Galway is a centre of excellence. The centre of excellence covers a region that extends from Letterkenny through Sligo and Mayo and on to Galway. We need inpatient beds. I am sorry that the Minister is not present. I have asked him about this previously. I appreciate that he was here earlier, but we need to get answers on whether there will be inpatient beds for Galway as part of the elective hospital or in conjunction with it as part of future plans.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister of State. In preparing for today, I took a look at the Sláintecare progress report for the period January to June 2021. The byline is "Right Care. Right Place. Right Time." Would it not be great if that were actually the case?

I take on board that there were three major issues that the Minister rightly identified in his contribution. These are the kernel of the problem. The Sláintecare document states that they are significant challenges. They are highlighted using a green, amber and red colour system with which the Minister of State will be familiar. The three challenges are significant and have been identified as such by the officials in the Department and the Minister. The issues are the implementation of the multi-annual waiting lists reduction plan, the implementation of the eHealth system and the development of the regional health areas. There may only be three such issues but they are three of the most significant, as identified and set out in the report.

The vision for Sláintecare is to achieve a universal, single-tier health and social care system whereby everyone has equitable access to services based on their need, not their ability to pay. That is the strapline; that was the major line that was announced in the press release when Sláintecare was launched, with great ambition, in 2017. It is great that we have ambition for our

health services. The ambition was to reform our healthcare system and end the divide between public and private healthcare.

The resignations of two significant members of the Sláintecare implementation advisory council are of genuine concern. How they were communicated internally to the Minister and Secretary General raises serious questions. The matter gives rise to questions about communication, confidence and the team to which we have entrusted our healthcare system. The lack of communication and the question of who saw fit to tell whom raises serious questions. It does not instil confidence in a system. The key concerns are clearly over a commitment to providing for the regional structures of the HSE. We see that the HSE has got too big. Arguments are made about how it handled Covid. There was a centre and people seemed to know what they were doing, yet we see this monolith that is the HSE. There are issues regarding accountability. The Minister of State knows well about accountability in the health service. I commend her on many of her contributions in this House in respect of the shortcomings of the health service. It is not just a matter of talking about the shortcomings, however, it is also about identifying areas where we can address them. I acknowledge the Minister of State's work in this regard.

The key question is whether, if the political establishment is fully behind Sláintecare, the HSE and political establishment are united in their approach and delivery? We have an endless situation in which better-off people can skip the queues. That is the reality of it. I spoke to someone the other day who could not even get cover from the VHI for a scan at the Beacon Hospital and had to pay a few hundred euro to another company in another part of Sandyford to look into potentially serious issues concerning cancer of the throat. This is outrageous; it is crazy.

We need to ask whether we are really committed to providing universal free access to general practitioners. Are we serious about reducing the waiting lists? Time and again, I stand up here and talk about the 907,000 people – just short of 1 million – who are waiting for treatment of some form. This represents an increase of 66,000 in 12 months. I understand the Covid issues, IT issues and all the various setbacks and challenges. I am not realistic in accepting these, and I realise that the Minister of State accepts them too, but we must be realistic.

The Irish Hospital Consultants Association, with which the Minister of State will be very familiar, was scathing about the progress on Sláintecare. It expressed deep concern about waiting lists, the resignations and the lack of meaningful solutions. These are of concern, but I am particularly concerned about how we are going to address the matter of the nearly 1 million people waiting for services.

I was very disappointed by the Department's response regarding the 172 children with scoliosis. This was the subject of a Claire Byrne interview last week. The Taoiseach, the Minister of State's leader, said there was some sort of systemic failure. Today, someone was talking about it on behalf of the Department but there were no solutions or dates set for the 172 children, some of whom have had two, three or four appointments cancelled. I am extremely concerned about this. I realise the Minister of State is also concerned.

Those are just some of the issues I wanted to share with the Minister of State in the small amount of time I had available. I thank her for coming to the House.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: There are three speakers outstanding, and a possible fourth. Could the Senators agree to four minutes each? In other words, the Minister of State must re-

spond at 6.20 p.m. Is that acceptable?

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I will try.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Do your best. That is all anyone can reasonably do.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I am particularly delighted for reasons that will become apparent that it is the Minister of State who is here, although I would have also welcomed the Minister. I will skip all the plaudits for Sláintecare. We are all behind it. There is not any lack of political will in respect of it. There never has been. That is not an issue. The issue is not a lack of money because successive Ministers have put major money behind it. There is evidence of that in the form of new primary care centres. The system and aspects of it, as they were planned to work, are working. The resignations and frustrations have not occurred because of a lack of will on the part of the Government or a lack of funding. I wonder if it comes down to how the HSE does its business. That is a question I would ask. I note the facial comment.

There are some difficulties in respect of which answers to our questions are warranted. For instance, the HSE works alongside organisations in the delivery of services, particularly in the area of disabilities, with which it is aligned. There is not pay parity between the section 38 and section 39 organisations. There ends up being a migration of staff and front-line service challenges arising as a consequence. There needs to be some innovation to change, fix and deal with that. Even where there are HSE and Tusla staff under the same roof, at times there are differences in how they are funded and in their terms and conditions of employment. Many of the services that provide residential services for people with disabilities have been chronically underfunded for years. There is a serious need to address that. As people are living longer, their needs are changing. We need to ensure the viability of these services that have been so faithful in their delivery. I refer, for example, to WALK in Drimnagh, which runs the most credible service. I had the honour of speaking at one of its events the other day. Those in that service are extraordinary in the context of what they deliver. What are we doing to ensure that the delivery of that service is future-proofed?

The Minister of State travelled to Donegal last Friday. I will not get into the specifics of that for many reasons. Let us take the example there of decision-making and management decision-making. What I am talking about is not unique to that service. At the weekend, many concerned and frightened parents contacted me to express their concerns about what will happen when their children need to go into residential care of the State. How will they know they will be safe? Who will advocate for them? Who will support them? Who will make sure safeguarding is in place? One of the organisations that contacted me at the weekend commented that it has a large number of safeguarding issues, that it has been trying to work with the HSE for the past five years and that it has reached a situation whereby it will have to move an individual to a new house. The HSE will not fund that. The organisation in question has asked the HSE to met the families involved but it has refused to do so. The house involved has been deemed by HIQA to be non-compliant due to the safeguarding issues to which I refer. The organisation has put forward solutions but the HSE's community healthcare organisation area 7 has refused to engage with it. There is something there that needs to be discussed. Perhaps there is an impediment among those involved and, to be fair, it is not their fault. We need to be solution-focused in how we ensure that there is the political will regarding Sláintecare is there, that there is funding available and that there is administrative accountability to ensure we are getting the delivery our people demand and deserve. I was not bad in sticking to the time.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Táimid buíoch díot as ucht an chomhoibrithe sin.

Senator Paddy Burke: I welcome the Minister of State and wish her well with delivery of Sláintecare. I welcome this opportunity to say a few words about Sláintecare. As Senator Seery Kearney stated, it is not an issue of money. We have never had more money allocated to our health services. The current allocation of €22 billion is an unbelievable amount of money when one weighs it up. It includes the allocation of an extra €4 billion last year. There is no doubt that there is something wrong in the health service. Money is not the problem. I would love if we could have a hospital that would provide services with respect to which the Minister of State could say this is how a hospital should be run, regardless of how much money or staff it would take, and to know what the capacity and efficiencies could be. It would be the type of hospital we need and would be a benchmark for other hospitals throughout the country.

I wish to concentrate for the remainder of my contribution on the National Ambulance Service. The Minister of State, as well as every Deputy, Senator and other Minister will be well aware of the ambulance service throughout the length and breadth of the country. That service is not working properly either. We have the National Ambulance Service and a private ambulance service. I do not understand why they cannot work better together locally. We have had farcical situations. For example, an ambulance based in Kerry could be sent to Mayo under the emergency rule put in place by HIQA whereby an ambulance must be on the road to an emergency within 90 seconds of receiving a call. That ambulance might arrive in Galway when an ambulance in Castlebar could become free. Then the ambulance from Kerry is stood down and returns home. On the way, it may be redirected again. That is farcical. Ambulances based in Kerry are probably operating in the west and ambulances based in the west operating in the south. It does not add up. It makes no sense. Everyone in the ambulance service will tell us that it is not working. Those in the private ambulance service will tell us that service is not working either. The Minister of State should consult the senior Minister and something should be put in place.

The unions are involved and they must be consulted on this issue. They are an obstacle to dealing with this. We have heard much about unions every day in both Houses. This is a typical issue where unions can play a part. We can have a more efficient ambulance service. Its role is to deal with emergencies for the benefit and welfare of our people. I ask the Minister of State to make addressing this issue a priority. From my investigations and on the basis of the information provided by the people I have talked to, I believe it can be resolved. We have a two-tier system. We have an emergency ambulance service and intermediate care ambulance service. This matter could be dealt with straight away. I have been advised that the driver of an ambulance need not be a fully qualified paramedic. The unions are an obstacle in that regard. That is why they must be brought on board. There will be problems in getting all of this together. I plead with the unions in this respect, as it is not only in their interests but also in the interests of the public. That message should go out loud and clear to them. I ask the Minister of State to consult the senior Minister and HSE staff in order to resolve this issue. It can be resolved.

Senator Maria Byrne: I welcome the Minister of State. I thank her for being here for this all-important debate. I know of her passion for health. I thank her for her response to the Commencement matter I raised last week in respect of the shortage of neurology nurses, not only in University Hospital Limerick but also nationally.

The Sláintecare programme has delivered 6,000 new staff, be they nurses or doctors, and 800 additional beds. I will concentrate on University Hospital Limerick in which there were 98

extra beds and then 60 extra beds, as a number of them had to be closed during the pandemic. Some 91 people are on trolleys along the corridors of that hospital waiting to be treated today. It has the highest number waiting to be treated in the country. That trend has been consistent. There were 90 people on trolleys on Monday. Approximately 67 were on trolleys last Friday and the numbers have gradually increased. We have extra beds. I agree with Senator Seery Kearney that this is not about a lack of resources, given that so much money has been invested in the health service, but we are not solving the issues. There is an issue there about which we need to have a conversation. As Senator Burke said, perhaps we need a master plan to set down how a hospital should work in principle. There must be a reason the system is not working despite all the investment and extra beds. I know the population is growing. The HSE sanctioned the filling of positions for two diabetic nurses at the hospital last year. Those positions have still not been filled. It is not that there is a shortage of nurses. Why have those positions not been filled? I raised the matter of neurological nurses the other day. There is a shortage of eight because there are currently only three in place. The work the staff do is fantastic and I do not take from it. However, I believe there are many key areas in which we need to fill positions. The money has been appointed to fill these positions. If we could fill them, it would help to reduce waiting lists, which are enormous. Most of the clinics and outpatient services in University Hospital Limerick and St. John's Hospital were cancelled this week, and will only reopen tomorrow. That is serious. The cancellation of procedures, X-rays and tests leads to further backlog. It is not acceptable.

St. John's Hospital, which is part of the group, was mentioned in the capital plan. There was mention of 120 beds and increased procedures that could be carried out. There are currently only ten day beds in St. John's Hospital. Perhaps that is something that could be looked at in terms of solving the problem in the mid-west. Our population is growing and there are many more companies in the area. There have been many job announcements recently, which means people will be moving to the area. The hospital is now too small for the size of the population. That is an ongoing issue. I believe something has to happen. Perhaps someone should be assigned to see how areas of the system are failing and what the problems are. I compliment the staff and the investment that has been put into the hospital. For the sake of good morale for the staff, we need to look at where the problems are and solve them.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Senator. No one could accuse her of forgetting the people from her home area. I invite the Minister of State to conclude the debate.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I will split my time. I will spend eight minutes delivering the Minister's speech and I will then take two minutes to address some of the issues that have arisen.

I thank all of those who have contributed to this evening's debate. As the Minister said in his opening remarks, access to high-quality healthcare when it is needed must be available to every girl, boy, woman and man if we are to be true to the vision of universal healthcare. It is pleasing to hear voices from all sides expressing their strong support.

A number of issues and themes have been raised in the course of the session. I will try to get to them all but if I fail to do so, the Minister will ensure there is a response on the issue concerned. Reducing dependency on the hospital model of care and supporting capacity in the community is pivotal to the Sláintecare vision. These measures will help people to stay in or near their homes for longer, either preventing hospital admissions or allowing for discharge earlier than would have been possible without these supports. The record level of investment

of €21 billion in the health and social care system is absolute testament to this and will support us in creating an integrated health and social care system where patients can have access to the right care in the right place at the right time. It is worth reiterating where the funding has been allocated. I do not need to go through all of it because I think Senators are well briefed, particularly in respect of the €250 million, the €50 million for the NTPF model and the €10.5 million that has been provided for an additional 19 critical care beds in 2022, bringing the total number of critical care beds to 340, representing a significant increase of 85 critical care beds. Some €45 million has been committed for a range of family-friendly measures to progressively move health services to being provided free at the point of delivery, based entirely on clinical needs, which is a critical tenet of Sláintecare. This funding will advance this objective specifically to ensure that care is accessible and affordable for the most vulnerable in our society.

Some €32.2 million will be available to expand GP care. Some €30 million of new funding has been committed to care of the elderly and €16 million has been provided in measures for Healthy Ireland and the national drug strategy.

Senator Kyne mentioned elective hospitals. On the question of whether new elective care centres should include inpatient facilities, I would like to say a little more about the elective facility programmes and why their establishment will be so important. Greater elective care capacity created by elective centres will release capacity in existing hospitals for non-elective and inpatient activity. In addition, being able to dedicate more resources towards non-elective and inpatient care could enable patient pathway improvements, as well as operational performance. All of these impacts could result in faster treatment of patients and enable them to receive better health outcomes and experiences. The additional delivery capability provided by the proposed elective care centres would create significant value for the wider public hospital network. This initiative will, in particular, free up significant theatre space and bed capacity and further enable the separation of elective and non-elective care. Surgical stay has not been included in the scope of these new elective care centres because it is assumed that these procedures, which are by definition more complex, will be carried out within the public hospital network. It is also likely that this approach will better suit patients, for example, making it easier for families to visit. At the same time, we are cognisant of the infrastructural needs in Cork, Galway and elsewhere. Those needs have informed the development of the business case, and the development of inpatient facilities in later phases is not excluded.

Significant progress has been made in several aspects of the e-health programme but there is still much to do. I would go further, in fact, and say there is a lot more to do for e-health. The e-health programme requires continued commitment and ongoing investment for people and infrastructural systems to sustain existing assets and facilitate reform through the introduction of new systems and processes. As Senator Burke mentioned, we also need to engage with the unions on e-health. It is a change in performance and working relations. That is a big piece within e-health about which we sometimes forget.

Capital investment in e-health has increased threefold since 2012. The 2021 service plan approved funding for an additional 300 ICT, e-health, health informatics and clinical staff to support the e-health programme. The pandemic demonstrated the value of e-health and ICT solutions. They were used to support contact tracing and the timely collection of data required to inform daily reporting and modelling of the trajectory of the disease. As vaccinations became available, the national COVAX system and self-service registration portal was crucial in enabling logistics, scheduling and the speed at which vaccines could be deployed, and for the smooth operation of the mass vaccination centres themselves.

I will try to address some of the concerns that have been raised about the regional health access areas. In the second quarter of 2021, given the immense pressure the health system experienced as a result of Covid-19 pandemic and the cyberattack, the HSE asked the Minister to pause the implementation of the regional health areas for a period of time in recognition that structural and functional change is time-consuming. The Minister agreed to the request in order that HSE senior officials could devote time to managing the vaccination roll-out and the cyberattack recovery. Nonetheless, the Department of Health is actively progressing the delivery of a business case for the implementation of regional health areas. Sustainable work has been undertaken over the past several months in progressing regional health areas within the Department. As noted earlier, research into international best practice has been completed and policy options have been drafted. Consultation with stakeholders including patients, clinicians, policymakers, hospital groups and community healthcare organisation officials has taken place. An advisory group of clinicians and patient representatives is being established to inform the implementation process.

A number of speakers referred to the accountability and the governance of Sláintecare and the new structures that are being put in place, including the establishment of a new Sláintecare programme board comprising the Secretary General of the Department of Health and the CEO of the HSE, along with senior members of their respective management teams. The assignment of responsibility and accountability for delivery of Sláintecare to the senior leadership across the Department and the HSE will ensure that Sláintecare is embedded across the healthcare system and is fully owned by the healthcare system.

Budget 2019 provided €20 million for the establishment of a ring-fenced Sláintecare integration fund to support service delivery focusing on prevention, community care and integration of care across all health and social care settings.

I will finish with items which were raised by Senators. One of the biggest issues from my short experience of working in the Department is in regard to recruitment. There is no shortage of money. Some of the Senators spoke about that. There is absolutely 150% political support on this. The funding has been provided. Unfortunately when engaging in a 50-week process to recruit an individual, therein lies one of our problems. That is one piece. The other issue is the lack of agility within the HSE. If one were in a business and had to manage one's funding and meet the needs, one would be flexible and willing to move. The lack of agility within the HSE is very apparent to me. It is always a race to spend the money, as opposed to, start spending it and start bringing people on board, cranking it up to get it started. We sometimes talk about talk about talk as opposed to actually putting in the foundations and building the blocks upon them, and keep building around that. It is not quick enough either to say when something is not working, to actually call it to a halt. There is that lack of movement within it.

Reform and sustainability of the disability sector is badly needed and that reform and sustainability will ensure the longevity within the providers. They need to know if they are investing that it is a partnership. It is no longer them and us. It has to be the Department, the HSE and the various providers. That is how we must ensure business is done and ensure that there is sustainability within the sector.

As regards the National Ambulance Service, and this is not unique to Mayo, I have heard it from a number of Deputies and Senators who bring it up at parliamentary meetings and various meetings where they have the opportunity to speak to a Minister. This needs political intervention. It needs that willingness across the Department, the HSE and unions to come together.

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Everybody has a role to play, nobody has a monopoly on preventing a person from getting quick access to healthcare. A three-second turnaround time is deemed to be on-call, the ambulance has moved. That is not what I deem successful. Rather, success is when one gets to the person.

Sitting suspended at 6.33 p.m. and resumed at 6.45 p.m.

Flood Risk Management: Motion

Senator Róisín Garvey: I move:

“That Seanad Éireann:

acknowledges that:

-floods are an inevitable part of life in Ireland but the frequency and intensity of flooding has greatly changed both now and into the future, as Met Éireann can confirm, because the type and intensity of our rain and our weather has changed and our flood management needs to adapt also;

-floods are usually caused by a combination of events including:

- heavy rains;
- overflowing rivers;
- broken dams;
- coastal storms and storm surges;
- a lack of vegetation;
- blocked or overloaded drainage ditches;
- infrastructure that was built on flood plains;

- numerous severe floods have occurred throughout the country in the last decade;

- floods present a risk when people, property, the environment and our cultural heritage can be potentially damaged, land eroded, nutrients leached from soils and soils washed away;

- through the appropriate measures in the right places, we can reduce their likelihood and limit their impacts;-natural flood management is an approach to managing soil, wetlands, woodlands and floodplains along a river to retain and slow water at times of flood risk, reducing the speed and the peak of floodwaters;

-international best practice in flood risk management recommends:

- a river basin whole catchment area approach;
- not passing flood risk management problems in one region on to another;
- insofar as is possible, we must engage in natural processes to help and guide us

as we move forward to solve flooding challenges;

- mitigation, non-structural and soft engineering measures should be considered and deployed where appropriate recognising their environmental value;

- structural measures, such as defence structures are important when it comes to the protection of human health and safety, and valuable assets;

- while structural measures such as hard engineering provide important and viable protection to many at risk communities, the design of flood risk solutions needs to both consider and, as appropriate, integrate non-structural and soft engineering measures as both more efficient and sustainable mitigation measures. Nature conservation and landscape management considerations need to be taken into account;

endorses Ireland's whole of Government approach to flood risk management which is co-ordinated by the Office of Public Works (OPW) across three strategic and policy areas:

- prevention: e.g. avoiding construction in flood-prone areas;

- protection: e.g. taking feasible measures, both structural and non-structural, to reduce the likelihood and impact of floods;

- preparedness: e.g. informing the public about dealing with flood risk and a flood and building community resilience;

recommends, due to the significance of the task we are facing, exacerbated by climate change, that the Government:

- maintains a multi-annual investment programme managed between the OPW and the local authorities in flood relief measures to protect communities;

- requests the OPW and local authorities to engage with experts such as hydrologists in the fields of flooding and coastal erosion for solutions to flood risk management;

- undertakes a national land use review, including farmland, forests and peatlands, so that optimal land use options inform all relevant Government decisions. The review will balance environmental, social and economic considerations and involve a process of evaluation of the ecological characteristics of the land. It will include consideration of emissions to air and water, carbon sequestration and climate adaptation challenges. Policy co-benefits, such as rewetting or forest regrowth to mitigate flooding risks in river catchments, will be considered. The national land use review is currently under way, at first phase, by the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications together with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine;

- promotes planting of 'protection forests' along rivers and lakes to protect water quality and assist in managing flood risks;

- progresses the development of a national policy on coastal erosion and flooding that takes account of damages present and predicted due to climate change;

- launches a new revised and strengthened River Basin Management Plan in 2022, drawing on a collaborative approach between all stakeholders, which is currently open for public consultation."

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Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. Is deas é a fheiceáil i gcomhair an ábhair thábhachtach seo. I thank the Minister of State for his time today. We have had lots of emergencies, and I believe flooding is an emergency and down the track things could be a lot worse. Today, we introduce a motion on flooding out of a deep concern about an increase in flooding across our country, including coastal, town and village farmlands. We cannot wait for things to get even worse to realise what we should have done. We cannot wait to have events such as those we witnessed in Germany happen here.

Warmer temperatures mean warmer air and more moisture which results in heavier rainfall. According to Met Éireann, the frequencies of heavy precipitation events, also known as rain, show a notable increase of approximately 20% at least during autumn and winter months, at a conservative guess. How will crops grow and cattle be fed if more and more land is flooded for longer periods? What effect will increased flooding have on indigenous food supplies at a time we need to be more resilient as a nation.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA,, climate projections indicate an increase in the likelihood of river and coastal flooding, water stress to crops, pressure on water supply and adverse impacts on water quality, and negative impacts on human health and well-being. We have all seen the mental health devastation brought upon people who have lost family homes due to flooding in many parts close to where I live in counties Clare and Galway. Are we going to wait until cars are floating down all of our main streets and hundreds of people are drowning to take this issue seriously?

We need to put our money and expertise where our mouths are and mitigate flooding threats properly. We in the Green Party have looked for climate proofing measures for our farms and coastal and inland communities for decades. Now, luckily, every party is talking about climate change, which is positive. The time for talking is over. It is our duty to protect farmlands, crops and all of our villages and towns in coastal areas and along rivers. Bad flood management will not suffice. Hard engineering solutions alone will not solve the problem, although they will play a part. It is like trying to stop water coming out of a colander. Blocking one hole just increases the quantity coming out of other holes.

Every town and city in Ireland is built on a river because that was how everything was transported long ago. I experienced kayaking down Parnell Street in Ennis a number of years ago. The plan at the time was to raise the wall parallel to that street along the river bank. Lo and behold, two years later the flooding had moved to Abbey Street. Instead of repeatedly destroying the same businesses year after year, we have just moved the problem further down. This was due largely in part to bad planning in the past, which resulted in building on floodplains. Enough of the past; we have to face the reality of now and the future.

Our rivers host villages and towns all along their routes. This means that every river and town is susceptible to flooding and sorting out the flooding problem in one place just moves the problem somewhere else, be that to farmlands or the next village or town. Prevention is better than cure. If we do not move towards proper whole river and catchment-based solutions as soon as possible, we will waste millions of euro blocking holes in a colander instead of investing properly in upstream and design solutions for entire areas.

We need upland bog rewetting. As we all know, bogs are like sponges. We need the right trees planted in the right places, as they help to soak up water and hold onto soil instead of soil depletion, which then causes the shallowing-out of rivers leading to increased flooding. There

are amazing solutions in other jurisdictions and great researchers from Trinity College Dublin and elsewhere who make a brilliant case for mainstreaming nature-based solutions into integrated catchment management systems, which work at a fraction of the cost of other solutions.

One of the main reasons I brought this up was because I grew up 5 km from the closest village and not too far from a river. I am young but in my lifetime, I have witnessed devastation. Over the years, I have seen a large amount of land being covered and flooded. Farmers have tried to drag a sop of hay out of wet fields. I can see the visual of that and land slowly disappearing for longer periods, something which is happening more frequently. My neighbours and farmers are wondering what they can do. They cannot move their farms. We need to look seriously at what we are going to do.

I did not mention the Arterial Drainage (Amendment) Act 1995 in the motion, but the Minister of State has been handed a poisoned chalice. We do not need to be defensive as a Government about past problems, the Arterial Drainage (Amendment) Act or anything like that. We need to be honest and fair, look at the situation and realise that hard engineering on its own has not served its purpose and, in fact, sometimes we have wasted a lot of money on it. It will not be fair if we have hard engineering in one place because the problem will be moved somewhere else.

We need to face reality. We can blame climate change. I do not care what we blame, but the current practices are not fit for purpose. We have great examples of what can be done. I have mentioned previously a town in Pickering, England, which was offered hard engineering solutions only, and locals feared for their neighbours in a town down river. A catchment-based solution, in conjunction with the local authority, was agreed. The local authority also engaged with experts on catchment-based solutions, which were a quarter of the cost of other solutions. The town has never flooded since, nor has its neighbouring town downstream.

We have solutions. Let us not be afraid to admit we got things wrong in the past. Let us grab the nettle and do this for the people of Ireland who are worried about the flooding they will face this winter, be it in Cork city, Cloonlara, the midlands or coastal communities. The Minister of State has a huge job ahead of him because coastal flooding is a whole other ball game, given rising sea levels. I do not envy him but I would like him to know that I am here to help in any way I can, as are my colleagues in the Green Party.

Senator Pippa Hackett: I welcome this motion from my Green Party colleagues and acknowledge the work Senator Garvey has put into it. Quite simply, water is life. When it stays where it should, in proper quantities and at a correct flow rate, it supports life, whether that is ecosystems in soils, on land and in our waterways.

7 o'clock

When flow rates of water exceed the capacity of the soil, river, stream or drain, flooding will occur. It is quite simple but we see it all the time, and we are going to see more of it.

At this stage I believe we can all accept that climate change is going to bring with it increased rainfall and an increase in the incidence of flooding. This will have a knock-on effect for all of society. This programme for Government commits to a land use review to ensure that optimal land use options inform all relevant government decisions, and mitigating flooding will be an important part of that. The review will balance environmental, social and economic conditions, and will include consideration of carbon sequestration, climate adaptation challenges,

and emissions to air and water. The review is being overseen by a steering committee co-chaired by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. The steering committee has representatives from those two Departments, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and two independent nominees.

The land use review is being carried out in two phases. At present we have incomplete information on the things that we use our land for. Phase 1, which is already under way, will assess the characteristics of land types and land uses across Ireland. It is chaired by the EPA with technical advisers from across many Government Departments. Phase 2 will build upon the results of this review and will consider policies and measures in the context of the Government's wider economic, social and climate objectives. Better data means better policy, and knowing more about how we use land means that the Government can make better policy choices.

In relation to flooding, some lands are meant to flood and particularly during the winter months. We must also recognise the increased incidence of flooding during the summer months, and in particular the devastating consequences that this can have for farmers, businesses, homes and wildlife. One area that floods a lot is the Shannon Callows, a unique area I have visited on a couple of occasions, most recently with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan. The Minister of State will recall that we shared a boat trip during the summer and while it was lovely it was not quite the romantic voyage it sounds. We were on a fact-finding mission with officials from Waterways Ireland and the Office of Public Works, OPW, for which the Minister of State is responsible. We travelled from Banagher in County Offaly to the Meelick weir, where we met representatives from the Irish Farmers Association and the Save Our Shannon group.

It was a valuable visit for both of us, during which it became clear to me that there are many different issues that need clarification as well as action. I realised that while everyone affected by multi-year summer flooding wants action on pinch points, there are different interpretations of what these actually are. Both interpretations need addressing. The first interpretation relates to pinch points along the riverbed, which if removed from the navigation channel will allow for the water level controlled for navigation to be lowered. I am aware that the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, has committed to this work but I realise that it is a long-term project.

The second interpretation of pinch points refers to the build-up of silt and vegetation at various locations. Again, I understand that the management of this falls into the remit of the OPW maintenance programme. This is about balancing needs and it must be done fairly. Yes, the River Shannon is important for tourism but it also has a significant impact on farmers and on biodiversity, with the broods of many wading birds in this area under significant threat from the summer floods.

We need to get that balance right. A mix of nature-based solutions and some structural management is needed. This summer flooding is no longer once in 100 years, or even once in a generation. It is compounded by climate change and has a direct negative effect on livelihoods and biodiversity, and specifically in the area that concerns me most in west Offaly. I want to continue to work with farmers and environmentalists, and with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, with a focus on practical and effective solutions to this delicate and rapidly changing situation.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I welcome the Minister of State. I commend Senator Garvey on the work that she has put into this motion, and we are all fully behind her on the details of it.

I echo many of my colleagues' comments.

I want to talk a little bit about adaptation because there is a reality here. We could talk about mitigation, which is very important and where we need to put a lot of funding, but we also need to address the fact that flooding is now a reality for Ireland. The IPCC report for the first time looked at a regional breakdown. It is showing that northern Europe, and Ireland in particular, are going to see more flooding and more rainfall. For Ireland we are talking about hard storms rather than the soft rain that we are all used to. This is going to become a reality for us. I live in Galway where we can see it already. The Irish Centre for High-End Computing has said that we are going to see ongoing flooding around the hospital in Galway.

We need to look at a couple of things. Absolutely, we need to look at some of the hard infrastructure for cities and to protect homes, but fundamentally there has been a lack of investment when it comes to nature-based solutions for flooding. What happens upland affects us on the coast also.

All of the measures referred to by the previous speakers are key to this but we also must look at planning. We have to stop giving planning permission for housing and particularly for things like hospitals and schools along our coastline. Some towns will, over time, have to look at changing and migrating higher upland. Consider Barna in particular. It possibly needs to be 10 m to 15 m higher than where it is now, which is shocking to hear. It does not mean that we do not use our coastal roads, but it means that we look at changes of use, tourism and leisure along coastal routes, which can be closed for some days at a time such as greenways and blueways. That is part of the solution but it can also be quite positive because we are bringing tourism to the parts of the country that are going to be most deeply impacted. Some of those places that will be most deeply impacted will be Galway, Clare and Limerick, and places on the east coast such as Dublin and Louth. We have seen some of the impacts already on places like Howth for instance.

I am aware of the amount of work the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, is putting into this, and all of the reports that are ongoing. If we look across the developing world we can see some of the future that lies ahead of us. Ireland has a temperate climate and we have been somewhat complacent, but climate change is knocking on our door, it has opened the door and it is here now for us in this country as well.

We need to step up when it comes to climate finance for developing countries but we also need to look at adaptation within Ireland and for our own communities. Some 70,000 homes in Galway are at risk of flooding by 2050. We need to protect those people but we also need to stop building in places we know are at risk, because there is only so much that we can do. I thank Senator Garvey for all the work that she has done.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW, and I acknowledge the enormous amount of work that the OPW does in this area. I also welcome the Minister of State, Senator Pippa Hackett, who has huge responsibility around land use and this goes over a core aspect of her work and other related issues.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly spoke about nature-based solutions, which is a very important sentence. I welcome Senator Garvey and the Green Party for putting forward this very important motion. It is not new. It is in the programme for Government and the aspirations are there, but if one believes in something it is worth saying time and time again. Everything in the

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programme for Government does not get done, and this is the green tinge and their focus, and I would expect nothing less of the Green Party than to pursue it. I am very supportive of it. I just wanted to say this at the very outset.

I am also very taken by recent statements in relation to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, the Green Party, and being the farmers' friend. I believe that is a genuine statement. It is one that is constantly hard to get across, but the Minister does talk about interventions. Let us consider nature-based solutions and look at suggestions. I draw the House's attention to a very interesting document, *Woodland for Water: Creating New Native Woodlands to Protect and Enhance Ireland's Waters*, which also addresses flooding. It is a particularly good publication that was drawn up by the Department. It is very impressive. It sets out areas such as increasing the quality of planting.

I am going to focus on the issue of nature-based solutions during my few minutes here today. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in particular has a focus on continuing to foster the sustainable development of agriculture, forestry and land use in the context that we are talking about today. That is about increasing the quality of planting and having the right trees in the right place. I have heard the Green Party mention this so often that it has now become another strap line. The idea has sunk into my head and is one in which I believe. It is constantly being used, and when the same thing is repeated, it certainly sticks, so I commend the Green Party on that.

Promoting the planting of diverse tree species is critically important. Improving the level of farmer participation is the bit I want to talk about. I looked at the IFA's submission on the budget. Farmers and landowners are willing, ready, capable and determined to assist in combating climate change, but in reality they are challenged by it, as is everyone. They are no different. We have to look at imaginative ways to support them financially through premiums, grant aid and assistance to start, for instance, creating 20 m boundaries around river courses, lakes, watercourses and the benefits tied up in that. All of that is an important aspect.

How are we going to promote best practice and knowledge transfer in terms of natural solutions to address these problems? I want to see a greater emphasis on and engagement and discussion with the farm representative groups. I am a member of the agricultural panel and was elected as Senator to it, so I will always advocate for the agricultural community. It has a critical role to play but, more important, it is willing, ready, capable and able and clearly wants to address these issues.

The agricultural community wishes to address the issues related to setback planting. A Senator spoke earlier about soil stabilisation. We see all the benefits of planting along the margins of between 20 m and 25 m from watercourses to protect them and to create pockets of wetlands and settlement areas. All the benefits of that are very important. We talk about greenways and have seen wonderful examples and loads of smaller alternatives to greenways such as ecosystems and ecoways, which are really important.

I want to address the issue of the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, which most of us know as GLAS. I welcome the fact the scheme has been rolled over again and €200 million has been allocated to ensure there is no break in the main agri-environment scheme under the transition arrangements, pending the introduction of the new Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, in 2023. That is very important. One of the things that we have learned from CAP and the new CAP is this heavy emphasis and focus on environmental green initiatives. That is to be

encouraged, but it goes back to the fact farmers and landowners will need to be supported on a range of issues.

I like the focus on ecology in the motion. The focus on the woodland environmental scheme is really important. As I said earlier, it is important we have additional grants. Of course we have to reduce sediment running off into watercourses and intercept and prevent nutrients, damaging contaminants and pesticides running into watercourses. Of course we need to have greater bank stabilisation and food inputs into the aqua ecosystems. Of course we have to develop native woodlands for biodiversity. We have to link them into a habitat linkage. We have to address carbon sequestration and the challenges and opportunities that come with all of this. Let us keep the ecological focus, look at the opportunities for farmers and landowners, and yet be mindful and conscious in particular about the acid sensitivity protocol for afforestation that has been set down by the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA.

I was in Mountmellick two weeks ago and walked along a low strip of land, and I know the Minister of State with responsibility for land use and agriculture will be aware of the flooding that has occurred in the region. On my visit I saw at first hand a project where there had been very little soil intervention but there had been planting and the creation of ecosystems, which may prevent flooding while increasing biodiversity.

I commend the Green Party on tabling this motion in Private Members' time and fully support the initiative.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I welcome the Minister of State. We have discussed flooding on many occasions over recent times. I am delighted to participate in this debate. I thank Senator Garvey and her colleagues for tabling the motion.

We must acknowledge that for far too long the grief that flooding has caused for communities, families and individuals has not been adequately dealt with, but in recent years that situation has changed. The previous Government, which was a confidence and supply Government, gave a commitment to spend €1 billion on alleviating flooding difficulties over the next number of years. That is very welcome. There are two major flood schemes - the OPW's flood relief capital works programme and the minor works scheme that is carried out by county councils. The latter is a very good scheme because it involves the local community and local knowledge.

As Senators Boyhan and Garvey have spoken very strongly about, we must all realise we will have to look at new ideas, and the more we can use nature to do this, all the better. We must also realise that in dealing with this issue, we cannot eliminate drainage. That is the reality. One of the reasons is that the pattern of rainfall has changed. The amount of rainfall over two days 30 or 40 years ago can now fall in a few hours, which creates immediate problems. Looking at the breakdown of the way rain falls in this country, in the east there is in excess of 750 mm of rain per annum, in the west between 1,000 and 1,400 mm of rain or more falls per annum, and in mountainous areas that figure is 2,000 mm. Clearly, the midlands and west have a bigger problem with this than other parts of the country due to the pattern of rainfall.

Quite a number of projects have been considered and completed, on which I thank the present Minister and the OPW for their engagement. I also thank two former Ministers of State, Deputy Canney and Mr. Kevin Boxer Moran. The three individuals have done significant work in meeting communities and working with groups to ensure the proper systems were put in place to avoid people being flooded. One fault I would have with some of the schemes is that

water may be pushed out to flood somewhere else. That is certainly a big pinch point in that there is no point in protecting a town if you are going to push the water out five or six miles to flood a couple of hundred acres of land. Too many farmers, small businesses and communities in this country have suffered for too long. How many times was the drainage of the Shannon discussed at political meetings at the end of a pub over the past 50 years? I would say it was drained a thousand times at those meetings but it has not happened, although it is beginning to happen in a certain way now.

We must consider the River Shannon. Twenty State agencies have a stake in operating the water levels on the River Shannon, which is unbelievable. Apart from that, there are also quite a number of voluntary organisations like the farming organisations. It is high time, and I introduced a Bill to the House today in this regard, and I thank every side of the House for assisting me in that, that we got to a point, and I am not talking about eight to ten years but in the next year or two, where we move to a single agency to look after the River Shannon. How long have we heard about the build-up of silt on the River Shannon? Two or three years ago there was an arrangement for Bord na Móna to remove the silt, but as far as I am aware it never happened, so silt will have built up, which reduces the capacity of the river and the flood is going to expand into adjoining land. Therefore, the removal of silt must be a priority. I understand that with less happening on our bogs now, that will not be as big an issue.

We can go back over the years and look at what the Land Commission and the drainage board did. They did a very significant job in this country of ensuring the majority of areas did not flood, but the reality is there is climate change. Nobody can deny that. I reiterate strongly what Senator Boyhan said. The farming community members who engage with me on this in the Roscommon-Galway region are very anxious to play their part. In a fair-minded way, they understand that changes have to be made, and I have no doubt but that they want to become part of the solution. I also believe in the sincerity of Senator Garvey; the Minister of State, Senator Hackett; Senator O'Reilly; and others here. They want to come up with new ideas. I hope that with my legislation and this motion, taking this matter very seriously, we can move forward in a progressive way, taking everything into account but ensuring we have far better management of flood events. There is no doubt about it: we will have to deal with such events because climate change is out there.

Senator John Cummins: I welcome my colleague and friend, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, to the House. I wish to put on the record of the House the Minister of State's commitment to addressing flooding across the country alongside the OPW. The Minister of State is on record as having expressed his frustration - deep frustration at times - in being unable to spend the money his Department has been allocated to introduce flood mitigation measures and to protect homes and businesses. I am, therefore, delighted we are getting an opportunity to speak about a very important issue to so many people across the length and breadth of the country.

In my county of Waterford, the OPW has spent over €29 million on flood protection measures, both major and minor works, over the past decade. A very significant portion of that funding was spent on phases 1 to 4 of the Waterford city flood defence scheme, which included flood protection measures in the village of Dunmore East. I am not against new ideas, I am not against mitigation measures, I am not against - in fact, I support - nature-based solutions and I support avoiding building on floodplains. However, I also support hard engineering measures in the case of flood protection. The reason I do is that I have seen first-hand the benefit it has had for my city of Waterford, the first city in Ireland to be fully protected from floodwaters.

I think back to when I was Mayor of Waterford city in 2014 and a night in March, I believe, when the St. John's River broke its banks. We were in the process of carrying out flood relief measures in the area in the construction of flood defence walls when the river broke its banks and flooded about 30 homes. I was there on the ground putting in place sandbags to stop the water going through people's houses from front to back. Then I had the pleasure only 12 or 18 months later, when I was Mayor a second time, to be back at the same location in Poleberry to open up the flood defence measures and a fantastic walking and cycling way which has been built all along the riverbank of the River Suir. That is an example of a hard engineering measure which has worked very successfully. It has saved over 600 houses and businesses from being continually devastated by floodwaters, having experienced such devastation for decades previously. Therefore, while I support mitigation measures and soft measures, we also have to realise that hard engineering solutions have a key role to play in protecting towns and cities like mine from the devastation floodwaters bring. I know the Minister of State has been frustrated by opposition to many of those schemes. I think of Cork city. Time and time again we see politicians and business people sweeping water out of their businesses. We need to get on with carrying out those flood protection defences, and I know the Minister of State is absolutely committed to that.

If I may be slightly parochial, I know the Minister of State has visited Ardmore. Over €70,000, I think, was allocated for a coastal erosion and flood risk management study of Ardmore, but we need to see measures put in place to stop the fantastic amenity of St. Declan's Way, which the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, opened officially in Mount Melleray, stretching all the way from Ardmore up to Cashel, being already washed into the ocean. We need rock armour on that beach and we need it sooner rather than later. There are other schemes that need to be progressed in AGLISH, Ballyduff and Dungarvan and its environs. I know those schemes are on the OPW project list but we really need to see them expedited as a matter of urgency, and I implore the Minister of State to take that on board. I hope he will not be continually frustrated in his role as Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW in doing what he wants to achieve in protecting homes and businesses for the people of Ireland.

Senator Lynn Boylan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I commend this motion from the Green Party. Many here have said that we know that climate change means flooding will be an increasingly frequent issue. This summer alone we bore witness to the extreme flash flood events not only close to home in western Europe but also across the world, in China and Turkey. They are a devastating embodiment of the extreme climate events that will become more and more common.

I welcome in particular the inclusion of natural flood management in the motion. I agree with the Green Party Senators that we need a mix of hard and soft engineering solutions. Studies have shown that when carried out appropriately, natural water retention can slow down the flow and hold the water in the landscape for between 12 and 24 hours. Natural water retention also has knock-on benefits for climate regulation and preventing soil erosion, and it enhances biodiversity. In 2019, I brought over an expert from the Slow the Flow programme in Britain to outline exactly how it was working really effectively over there and was also creating jobs for people and providing incomes to farming communities. The expert spoke in the Leinster House audiovisual room. We know that nature-based solutions, as he outlined on that occasion, are effective in reducing flooding, particularly in small catchment areas. The cost savings are immense when one takes account of the role played by nature-based solutions in reducing the occurrence of smaller, frequent floods or what are called "nuisance floods" in the United States.

The role of nature-based solutions in addressing the larger catchments or the once-in-100 -year floods is still unknown because we do not have the data on it, but such solutions are showing promising signs. We have to listen to and work with the science and always evolve the way in which we approach flood management. In addition, it is vital that nature-based catchment management projects are community-led and that communities are included in the process. This also holds true for hard landscaping measures. Nature-based solutions are not about flooding farmland but about working with farmers to install these soft engineering measures.

It would be remiss of me in a debate on flooding not to mention the Arterial Drainage Act, and I completely agree with Senator Garvey's comments on it. Many of the issues surrounding flooding and how it is managed stem from that Act. Under the Act, the OPW carries out an annual programme of statutory arterial drainage maintenance to a total of 11,500 km of river channel and approximately 730 km of embankments. The Irish Wildlife Trust describes the OPW's works as a "programme of river destruction". Its petition calls for a new law that is fit to address the biodiversity and climate crisis and that works with - and for - people and nature. The last time we had a debate on flooding in the Seanad, it was unfortunate that the Minister of State tried to twist the words of what those of us who were talking about nature-based solutions were trying to say. We do not want to abolish flood management; we want a review of an Act that is decades old and to ensure that it is working on the best information available.

That said, there are solutions that the OPW could implement without any change to the legislation if the Minister for State was minded to do so. First is the lack of transparency around the programme of works under the arterial drainage scheme maintenance programme. I ask the Minister of State why a fully transparent portal cannot be put up on the OPW website outlining the programmes of works and detailing what works are to be carried out, when they will be carried out, what environmental assessments have been done for those works and the findings of those environmental assessments. In response to a parliamentary question, the Minister of State said that the annual programme can be viewed in hard copy in three offices around the country, on appointment. That is not the hallmark of a body that is open to scrutiny by the public. I believe it falls well short of the body's obligations under the Aarhus Convention to actively disseminate information about the environment.

The public and environmental NGOs are forced to go through the FOI process to get appropriate assessment reports. Why is there no accountability when appropriate assessment screening is substandard? Why is there no accountability when the OPW does not even do what it said it would do in an assessment? It appears that the OPW is of the view that it is above reproach when it comes to carrying out works. I believe this is not just regarding flood works, as I have heard allegations that the OPW has destroyed a bat roost at one of its monuments and is now actively trying to avoid prosecution. The OPW cannot be above the law; it must act within the law.

The motion notes that international best practice in flood risk management recommends, among other things, "not passing flood risk management problems in one region on to another region". I could not agree more. I think flood risk management is a good example of the folly of partition on this island. Ireland is a single unit and weather knows no borders. Rivers and river basins span the two jurisdictions. It is clear divergent policies across Ireland would have a damaging impact on the other jurisdiction.

There is a need for a joined-up approach, which was brought into stark relief when we saw the footage from Meenbog near Ballybofey in County Donegal. After Amazon started con-

struction on a windfarm, there was a major bog slide that saw a slurry of peat flowing into rivers north and south of the Border. In light of the cross-Border nature and the river basin management programme, perhaps the Senators proposing the motion would consider submitting a copy of it to the North-South Ministerial Council so that we have a proper joined-up and coherent approach to flood management.

Senator Marie Sherlock: On behalf of the Labour Party, and as somebody who is based in the north inner city of Dublin in a place that was the site of fairly dramatic flooding almost two decades ago, I welcome this motion. As has been said a number of times in this debate, as global warming continues to bite, flooding will probably be one of the main ways that climate change will be experienced in this country. There tends to be a misconception out there that as an island, we escape some of the most extreme weather events, but as history shows, flooding is one area where our own climate can be extremely unforgiving and devastating.

The second point I wish to make is that while, year after year, we see the devastating pictures of flooding from the River Shannon, and almost on an annual basis from Cork and other parts of the country, it is also a significant concern for Dublin. I wish to quote directly from Dublin City Council's current climate action plan, which covers the period up to 2024. It states:

Dublin Bay's average sea level appears to be rising faster than initially forecasted and has risen by twice the global average in the last 20 years. The number of days with heavy rainfall has also increased, and the amount of extreme flooding events in the capital has risen in the last 10 years.

While many might say that flooding is an issue that affects the west and the south, it is also a very real concern, prospect and threat in the capital. Dublin City Council's climate action plan goes on to rank the likelihood of increased coastal flooding in Dublin due to rising sea levels, and increased river flooding, as high. Most starkly, the plan identifies the increasing risk of so-called pluvial flooding in the city, which can affect any part of the city and not necessarily those in close proximity to the coast, as very high. When we break that down into the impact on households and businesses, Gama location intelligence agency, which is used by most insurers, has stated that if there is a 2°C rise in temperatures by 2050, as many as 23,000 properties in Dublin will be at a direct risk of flooding. That is not far off the nationally projected figure of 70,000 properties at risk. Bringing it back to the area that I am most familiar with, it is the area that covers Fairview, North Strand, Ballybough, Dublin Port and the immediate areas on either side of the River Liffey. The costs arising from such a flooding event playing out are enormous. It is estimated that the cost would be in excess of €2 billion for the country as a whole and over €600 million for Dublin alone. That relates only to the cost of damage to property; it does not include damage to amenities, infrastructure, roads and streets, etc.

While we must acknowledge and recognise that this motion is taking place in the context of broader Government moves to address the very real concern that we are now facing in respect of climate change, we should also prepare for the prospect that we may not meet our targets. I note the last line of the motion mentions a "new revised and strengthened River Basin Management Plan in 2022". We need to see a very ambitious river basin management plan. It may not sound like the most exciting of plans, but it will have a very real impact on households. In particular, it is worth highlighting that Ireland is one of only six member states that has not completed its consultation phase, which will run until April 2022, and that previous European Commission reports on Ireland have criticised our river basin management as having low ambition, being underdeveloped and lagging behind in implementation. That is damning in respect

of the attitude towards river basin management in this country.

Reflecting locally on when the issue has been taken seriously and when there has been success, 20 years ago it took the evacuation of 200 houses and the intervention of the Taoiseach, who happened to live in the area that was flooded near the River Tolka, which is second largest river in Dublin after the River Liffey, for those flood defences to be put in place. Thankfully, we have not seen significant flooding there over the last 15 years because of the hard engineering works that were done in the area. However, there remain concerns, for example, on Richmond Road, along the River Tolka area.

Of course, we must talk about soft engineering, the increased need for forestry and other measures, but in an urban context, we must also look at planning. While we need appropriate high-rise buildings in the city, the design of some of the buildings that are being planned along the River Tolka currently is of concern in terms of how it may impact on the river into the future.

I wish to conclude by stating that I welcome the motion. Obviously, we would like to see greater ambition with regard to setting targets in a motion to try and push the debate on, but having this discussion with the Minister of State today is most important.

Senator Paddy Burke: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I wish him well with his portfolio. I welcome the debate on this issue. It is an important issue that needs to be debated, so I thank the Green Party for tabling the motion.

I agree with much of what the party's Senators have said. There are areas where flooding can travel upstream but, equally, there have been instances in the past where changes have resulted in large-scale flooding and landslides, one of which I will outline. It happened in west County Mayo on the Killary Harbour, where, years ago, many people had problems with the overgrazing of the mountains. The overgrazing of the mountains meant floods were coming too quickly down the mountains, so people decided to reduce the grazing, with the result that when grass and heather grew on the mountains, they held the water to such an extent that there were landslides. There was a huge landslide on the Louisburgh side of Killary Harbour that demolished the bridge in Leckanvy. That issue should be taken into account in the context of some of the proposals in the motion.

Nevertheless, there are areas where the water can be held back, as I see in my area, Castlebar, where there are three lakes, namely, Lannagh, Bilberry and Islandeady. If a proper weir system were put in place, it could hold back the flow of the water that leads eventually into the River Moy after going through Lough Conn or Lough Cullin. This is a typical example of where the water in the winter could be kept at the summer level. If all these initiatives were put in place, there would have to be some responsibility. It could be the responsibility of the local authority or the OPW but we cannot depend on the community to advise and check the weather forecast to decide whether the weir should be opened and the water let flow downstream before the floods come. There has to be somebody to plan the issue and take responsibility for letting floods go when necessary and for closing the weirs or taking charge of whatever other systems might be in place to hold back the water upstream. They should be put in place and manned.

I thank the Minister of State and his predecessor, Kevin Boxer Moran, for the flood defences that have been promised and put in place. An issue was raised by a former colleague of ours in the House, Michelle Mulherin, in respect of severe flooding in Crossmolina and Ballina. The Minister of State might give us an update on those two schemes. I presume they are well

advanced and we will see the fruits of all the planning that has been put in place for them. Business people, and the local people in general, suffered great hardship arising from the flooding in both Crossmolina and Ballina. In any regard, I wish the Minister of State well.

Greater deployment of the Defence Forces is needed to deal with sea erosion. A great job was done in Lahinch, County Clare, which was one of the most fantastic jobs I have seen. Between the golf course and the bay, some magnificent walkways have been built. It is a wonderful feature that could be rolled out, I have no doubt, in other counties as well. It has been done to the highest standard. Perhaps it will be needed further down the road in Doonbeg, although there have been some objections and I am not *au fait* with them. I congratulate everyone involved in the Lahinch project.

I welcome the motion put forward by the Green Party. Without doubt, it contains proposals the Minister of State can take on board.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I commend Senator Garvey and the Green Party on tabling the motion. The Minister of State has been love-bombed by the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, on a cruise in the Seanad and there is a party that wants to love-bomb him to Cork to ensure our flood defence scheme will be put in place. To be fair to him, we commend him on his work, interest, vigilance and strident approach to flooding.

Senator Garvey stated we cannot afford to wait and the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, spoke about flooding being a fact of life. Almost 12 months ago to the week, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, were in Cork city together. We stood with residents, homeowners and business owners who had been devastated by another event of flooding that caused consternation. In 2020, we were fortunate that the flooding event was not as catastrophic as it could have been in the city, unlike in west Cork in August, earlier in the summer.

We must ensure delivery of the flood defence scheme for Cork city. This debate is very important, timely and opportune. The Minister of State, like many of us, is frustrated and anxious for progress to continue. I understand the result of the court case during the summer, but for those of us who believe Cork city must be indemnified from flooding, insofar as it physically can be, we must progress with pace the Cork flood relief scheme.

I do not mean to be patronising but I commend the Minister of State and his officials. I will not name the officials but they are very dedicated and committed people who have a clear view and have engaged and listened. In the case of Cork city, it is not that there was a one-direction approach; there have been multiple consultations and engagements with reports. I am of the view that the Minister of State's legacy in the Department will be the nailing down of the Cork flood relief scheme. I know he will do it, along with Cork City Council. Our city is living on tenterhooks.

I have only one motivation, namely, the city I love, the city I grew up in and live in. I want Senators to understand this. I accept that some people have a different viewpoint from mine; I understand that and respect it. Nevertheless, I have seen men and women in the Middle Parish who were flooded, their homes destroyed. I have seen business owners, on multiple occasions, having to clean out their businesses. I will not in this House use the terms I could use but Senators can imagine. These are men and women who are doing their best, as business owners and also as homeowners.

If we are serious about the national development plan, urban regeneration, the living city

initiative and all the money we are proposing for the city of Cork, the most important project on which we must deliver relates to flood relief. I say that as a Corkonian, with my only vested interest being my city. That is not about economics; it is purely about making our city liveable for the men and women who live there. If we want to create a new city in the lower harbour, that is fine, but I am old Cork. I want to see a city that is developed and habitable. I want to see the vibrancy of old brought back to our old city.

We began this journey some 14 or 15 years ago. I said in this House almost 12 months ago that the scheme we have now is a better scheme because of the huge consultation and engagement that was done by the Department and, to be fair to him, by the Minister of State. As I said a year ago, the CFRAM study has done our city a power of a good, but it is time now for a real visual impact in terms of the delivery of the scheme. I thank the Green Party Members for tonight's motion and the Minister of State for his work. I hope we can have not just a debate but an outcome that will deliver for the people of Cork.

Senator Seán Kyne: I welcome the Minister of State. Most of us who have been in politics for some time have experience of the trauma and impact of a flooding event on homeowners, whether it be on a relatively small scale, when, for example, a small number of houses are affected, or a large-scale flooding event. The severe trauma people go through when their homes or businesses are flooded has a huge impact, not just for the day, night or period of time when the flooding happens but for a long period after that, as they wait for the inevitable response they hope will prevent a future event.

I spoke some weeks ago during a Commencement debate about Galway city's flood defences. As things stand, it will be a decade before those works are completed. It is not important who is around to cut the tape; the issue it is that it will be ten years before the work is fully done. The question I asked during that debate, which I put now to the Minister of State, is whether, realistically, there is anything that can be done to speed up a process like that. This is the difficulty we have.

A little more than a year ago, the Minister of State was good enough to come out to Clifden in Connemara the day after the flooding event that took place in the town. It was a huge event involving an unprecedented amount of rainfall concentrated in a short period of time. A number of areas in Clifden were impacted, including Clifden Glen, which the Minister of State visited first, the Low Road, where he met some homeowners, and Riverside, where a number of homes were flooded. He also met with engineers to discuss the storm water issue on the Low Road. Fortunately, work has been done by the county council to divert storm water before it reaches the small number of houses that are affected. We hope that will lessen the impact on those homes, if not prevent further flooding. However, the concerns and worries of families there, as well as those in Clifden Glen and Riverside, will continue for some time. I understand consultants will be appointed imminently to draw up a design for a low-cost scheme for the town and carry out a full catchment assessment and all the preparatory work that is necessary. Consideration should be given to upstream solutions as part of that.

I was contacted by a person in Clifden at the time of the flooding about cleaning up some of the debris and vegetation that were left in the middle of the town. The area in question is before you hit the eye of the bridge over the Owenglin river. This section is not in the control of the county council, the Office of Public Works or Inland Fisheries Ireland. It is a riparian river, as I understand it, and therefore control rests with adjacent landowners. Obviously, any works that take place would have to be done in consultation with Inland Fisheries Ireland and

whoever else might have to be involved. It is a large and difficult undertaking. These are some of the problems we face in Clifden. I hope that with processes running smoothly, we can come up with a solution.

The motion refers to the issue of how doing something in one location may impact on other areas. In fact, you cannot do something within a town that might have an impact further downstream within the same town. You can sort out one problem by building a barrier, for instance, but that will force water more quickly into another part of the town. I appreciate these are some of the complexities the OPW and consultants will face in designing schemes.

The motion mentions a national land use review, which would include farmland, forests and peatland, with a view to ensuring optimum land use options inform all relevant Government decisions. I welcome such a review provided it does not result in delays. If that work has to be done and could take a number of years, with the consequence that everything else must be put on hold, that is a concern. I am sure such a delay is not what is intended by the authors of the motion, but it is a concern.

I fully support the need to protect forests along rivers and lakes with a view to protecting water quality and assist in managing flood risks. As the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, knows, there are often solutions for riparian zones that should be done anyway from the point of view of carbon sequestration, amenity and habitat protection. If such efforts can assist with water retention, thereby slowing the flow of water, they certainly would be a welcome initiative.

I know the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, is caught, so to speak, by the demands of public procurement, the public spending code, planning procedures and processes, and all the rest of it. None of that is easy or quick and, as I understand it, none of it can be speeded up to a degree that would make a huge difference. I ask that he provide some clarity in regard to the statutory processes and the stages in the public spending code and planning system. Will he indicate whether anything can, in fact, be done to enable those processes to be speeded up to allow for completion of some of these schemes?

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I welcome the Minister of State and thank him for his work in the Department. His passion for the job was highlighted by Senator Cummins and borne out in a recent television interview about the legal logjam that has resulted in the scheme to which Senator Murphy referred being held up.

I welcome the motion put forward by Senator Garvey and other Green Party Members. It is a matter now of action. In my county, Longford, the county development plan is being discussed at a council meeting today. When you look at the maps every six years, it is noticeable there are massive changes in terms of there being more areas that are prone to flooding compared with the previous map. That struck me as I was looking again at the maps last night. Unless we take action, that situation is only going to get worse as the years go on.

The River Shannon traverses the whole western part of my county. There are many factors that have caused the flooding there; it is not just down to rain. We have many changed surfaces that have affected the ability of rainfall to sink into the soil. It is a combination of climate change, the human footprint we have left on our landscape and the granting of planning permission to build houses in areas that should have been flood zones. We saw the consequences of the latter recently when we were in Athlone with the Minister of State.

In February 2020, according to Met Éireann, there was 119 mm of rainfall around the Shan-

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non area, which is nearly four times the usual amount for that time of year. Those living along the Shannon in areas close to me, such as Clondara and Tarmonbarry, were left to deal with rising waters. The first time this happened, ten years ago, the area was submerged in several feet of water. As a result, many people were left stranded, not just residents but also farmers, with a huge amount of meadow and grazing lands under water. It is important to thank the local members of the Civil Defence and the Army for the work they have done during times of flooding in the various towns where people were stranded. They took food and other goods to them, including fodder for animals.

People living along the tributaries of the river are also suffering. While a great deal of work has gone into protecting towns along the river, for good reason, we must also remember the towns and lands alongside the tributaries into our main rivers. In February 2020, 6,000 acres were under water along the Shannon.

8 o'clock

The people who live along those tributaries also suffer. Therefore, I fully agree with Senator Murphy's proposal to have one authority to deal with the River Shannon rather than the multiple authorities currently. A sum of €7 million has been allocated to flood relief schemes. I ask the Minister of State for an update on the project in terms of the removal of pinch points and the various constrictions on the Shannon Callows? It is an area that we visited a number of months ago with him

When I first entered politics in 2009 there were many intercounty drainage committees and schemes, which worked together to make sure that the various counties within counties and crossing counties were drained. However, in 2014, many of these committee were abolished, which was a negative move. I would like them re-established or in another forum with local authority members progressing for their local area.

I wish to highlight that funding has not been put aside by local authorities to clean rivers within their areas. For example, the River Camlin is in my county flows from Granard in north Longford and traverses the county before entering the River Shannon at Clondra. Only €20,000 has been allocated for all of the drainage of the river. It took between eight and nine years of funding to do the river once. That is only one river, but now it is as bad as ever. More pressure needs to be put on or more funding given to local authorities to ensure these schemes are done more regularly. Every day as I travel along these rivers I see trees growing along the side of them that block the flow of water thus leading to lands being flooded, etc.

I compliment the Minister of State on his passion for the job. I know that he will be successful and wish him well. I thank the Green Party Members for tabling the motion and I fully support it.

Senator Maria Byrne: I am delighted the Minister of State is here. I thank my Green Party colleagues for tabling the motion.

I know how committed the Minister of State is to his Department and the work he has been doing. Where I live, I am surrounded by the River Shannon and most of my electoral area is surrounded by the river. Last May, I read in the newspapers that the OPW in conjunction with Limerick City and County Council appointed consultant engineers to work on the Limerick and environs flood relief plan. I welcome that announcement. Perhaps the Minister of State can update us about the scheme. The scheme encompasses the city centre Quays, Thomondgate,

Corbally, Annacotty, Montpelier, the docklands; Condell Road, Ballinacurr, Rosbrien, Ballysimon and the Old Cratloe Road. I am sure that Senator Garvey will not mind if I mention Westbury and Shannon Banks, which even though they are in County Clare are on the verge of Limerick city, and they are included in the scheme.

The Castleconnell flood relief scheme has been ongoing for many years. Castleconnell and Montpelier have been flooded many times. Works have been carried out bit by bit and I ask the Minister of State for an update now or at some stage.

The OPW has undertaken many successful schemes. Over the years money has been invested in Clancy Strand and O'Callaghan Strand, yet both were flooded the year before last. Is it planned to carry out further works at both locations? The height of the walls were raised and many incentives have been put in place but more than 1,000 houses are affected in the different areas to which I have alluded.

With regard to Castleconnell, the banks of the River Shannon have been broken on many occasions. The OPW has done wonderful work in the past and that work is ongoing. I ask the Minister of State for an update and to let me know if further works are planned.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I thank all the Senators who contributed, as well as the proposers of the motion. I welcome the fact that so many Senators have chosen to stay. Unfortunately, all of the Opposition Senators have left, which probably says a lot about their interest in this topic.

I welcome the opportunity to address this House on flooding matters and thank Senators for raising this important issue. The motion covers many issues and I will try to address as many of them as I can in the time that has been allocated.

The Government has a strong record in managing flood risk. The OPW is the lead agency for co-ordinating the delivery of flood risk management policy. It chairs the interdepartmental flood risk policy co-ordination group, which takes a whole-of-government approach to the issue of flood policy. I agree with some of the previous speakers. As anyone who has stood in the house of a flood victim or a shop and seen the scourge of flooding will know, such scenes drive me on in terms of my job and I know that it drives on the staff of the OPW whom I will discuss in a while.

The co-ordination group comprises representatives from eight Departments, two offices and the local authority sector. The OPW carries out this role by co-ordinating the implementation of the flood risk management policy and measures across three strategic areas. The first is prevention. This is achieved by avoiding construction in flood prone areas, which has been referred to by a number of Senators. Examples include the statutory planning system and the flood risk management guidelines that were issued by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in 2009, and the once-off voluntary homeowners relocation scheme, which is operated by the OPW.

Local authorities are required to have regard to planning guidelines, which set out a rigorous approach to flood risk assessment, when considering the development of plans and assessing planning applications. The OPW has continued to review forward-planning documents to help ensure the 2009 guidelines are implemented to promote sustainable development. These documents have included the regional spatial and economic strategies as well as development and local area plans.

The second area is protection. This is brought about by taking feasible measures to protect areas against flooding, including the implementation of major flood relief schemes that I will elaborate on later. In addition, the OPW's minor flood mitigation works and coastal protection scheme, which have been referred to by Senator Murphy and others, also provides 90% of funding to local authorities to address local flooding issues to a cost of €750,000. Since the establishment of the scheme in 2009 to the end of 2020, in excess of €55 million has been approved for more than 828 projects across all local authorities. Completed schemes, to the end of 2020, are providing protection to in excess of 7,325 properties, which makes a massive difference in local communities as Senators will be aware. The OPW's arterial drainage maintenance channel maintenance programme of 11,500 km of channel and 800 km of embankments protects 77 towns and villages, and 242,000 ha of agricultural lands.

I was disturbed, as I am sure Senators, councillors and farmers were, to hear the commentary a while ago on the Arterial Drainage Act. I am sure that many councillors and farmers will be disturbed to hear the unprovoked attack that was made on the Act. I am sure that many of the farmers whose lands have been protected from flooding and benefited as a result of the Act will be particularly perturbed, as will many Sinn Féin councillors, by the attack that was launched on the Arterial Drainage Act by Senator Boylan.

The third area is preparedness. This is by planning and responding to reduce the impacts of flood events, including through the establishment of the national flood forecasting and warning service, the national emergency framework for emergency management to develop national and community resilience. I must especially thank our colleagues in Met Éireann.

It is this flood policy that has led to the development and implementation of the catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme. The CFRAM is an evidence-based study that informs the Government's approach to managing the programme of €1.3 billion investment in flood risk management under the National Development Plan 2021-2030.

In response to the initial comments made by Senator Garvey, CFRAM is a whole-of-river solution. The programme takes in all of the catchment area not only areas around the mouth of rivers. The OPW, together with our partners in local authorities, conducts a flood risk study on the entire catchment area from the gestation to the completion of the programme. The national CFRAM study followed best international practice and was the largest study ever undertaken of our risk from significant flood events, including potential impacts of climate change. Detailed engineering assessment of communities looked at how neighbouring rivers and seas respond during a significant flood or storm events and mapped for each community the extent, nature and impact of such floods. Many Members of this House are former local authority members and would have fed information into CFRAM as representatives of local communities, as I did when I was a councillor. CFRAM has been very much a bottom-up approach, with total and absolute community engagement.

The 29 flood risk management plans published in 2018 are the output from the CFRAM programme that gives us not only the evidence of how these 300 communities will be affected from a once-in-100-year flood but also the evidence of how to address flood risk nationally by targeting that risk where the impact is greatest. This includes a significant investment in approximately 150 flood relief schemes in addition to the 50 major flood relief schemes already completed. These completed schemes are already protecting more than 10,000 properties and an estimated €1.8 billion of damage is being avoided. That is not insignificant.

Since the launch of the flood risk management plans in 2018, the Office of Public Works, OPW, has almost trebled from 33 to 90 the number of OPW flood relief schemes currently under design and construction in partnership with local authorities. Evidence from the CFRAM study highlights that when all these schemes are complete, 95% of at-risk properties can be protected.

Our flood risk strategy and approach to flood risk management have been benchmarked by Dutch experts. Many people have said we should look at what is happening internationally, and this is exactly what we are doing. People say God made the world and the Dutch made the Netherlands, so who better to consult than the Dutch? It is important to reassure the House that the engineering development and design of flood relief schemes is undertaken by expert consultants specialising in hydrology, hydraulic modelling and flood risk management, as alluded to in the motion. Detailed hydrological and hydraulic analyses ensure that the full catchment is understood. I know Senators are anxious that this be the case. It would be pointless otherwise. The proposed flood relief solutions will provide appropriate protections to communities without creating additional flood risk for areas nearby, upstream or downstream. Some Senators mentioned that in some cases the problem may be moved downstream, but that is absolutely not the case.

On the question of nature-based catchment management measures, whereas hard defences are necessary in some areas, as Senator Cummins mentioned, the OPW has been following developments and supporting research in the field of and nature-based catchment measures. I will be opening a scheme this week in Clonakilty where a nature base is an integral part of the design. The suitability and effectiveness of these types of measures is very much dependent on local geography and the nature and degree of flood risk. This is because every scheme is not the same. Nature-based catchment measures can reduce the hazard of more frequent low-intensity floods. However, the risk associated with these types of floods is lower than that posed by extreme floods. We have seen in Benelux countries and in Germany during the summer, as we did in my home town of Newcastle West in 2008, that when there is a monsoon effect and a cloud dumps four months of rain in four hours, nothing other than a hard-based and engineered solution will stop it. In some cases, even that is not enough. There are limits in the capacity of nature-based catchment measures to reduce risk. The OPW focuses on protecting against extreme floods, such as the once in 100 years event, as this gives the greatest benefit for capital invested.

Pilot and demonstration projects have indicated that nature-based catchment measures can provide benefits in reducing flood flows in small catchments, but there is very limited international evidence that they would provide significant benefits in large-scale catchments. I agree with Senator Boylan's comment that we do not have the data. The OPW acknowledges the calls for increasing the use of soft engineering flood mitigation, such as riparian native woodlands, swales and ponds. We are integrating those into our schemes. The OPW is very proactive about developing policy and supporting nature-based measures, with a number of initiatives such as all new flood relief scheme designs being procured now embedding a specific requirement to assess options for natural water retention based on the Scottish natural flood management methodology and the co-funding, with the EPA, of a major research project entitled SLOWWATERS to examine the effectiveness of soft engineering. We have also provided funding to the Inishowen Rivers Trust in Donegal to investigate the use of such measures to reduce flood risk and provide co-benefits and co-chairing, with the EPA, the working group on natural water retention measures that is intended to identify approaches that could be used to develop integrated catchment management measures to provide benefits to multiple sectors, such as biodiversity,

water quality, sediment control, as well as for flood risk reduction.

On the question of flood risk management and the impact of climate change, the OPW prepared a climate change sectoral adaptation plan for flood risk management for the period 2019 to 2024 in line with the requirements of the national adaptation framework and the Climate Action Plan 2019. The plan was approved by the Government in October 2019.

The sectoral adaptation plan sets out a long-term goal for adaptation in flood risk management to promote sustainable communities and support our environment through the effective management of the potential impacts of climate change on flooding and flood risk. It includes a range of actions to meet the objectives of enhancing our knowledge and understanding of the potential impacts of climate change for flooding and flood risk management through ongoing research and assessment with partners, adapting our flood risk management practice to effectively manage the potential impacts of climate change on future flood risk and aligning adaptation with regards to flood risk across sectors and wider Government policy, including planning and development.

Key actions in the plan focus on the ongoing assessment of the risks from climate change, the inclusion of adaptation in flood relief schemes and the consideration of potential future flood scenarios in planning and development management. Good progress is already being made on implementing some of the actions set out in the plan. For example, maps of future flood extents under climate change scenarios have been published through our web portal, *floodinfo.ie*. I beg to differ with the opinion that everything we do is like the third secret of Fatima. The OPW is providing funding to the eastern and midlands climate action regional office for research to further improve our understanding of the potential impacts of changing rainfall patterns. Senator Murphy referred to the differences between the east and west coasts.

Assessments have begun into the adaptability of flood relief schemes currently under design and those already completed, which is very important, as some of those must change as well. The design brief for future schemes includes a requirement to consider and plan for adaptation needs. There is also work towards the establishment of a national flood forecasting and warning service, as I referred to a while ago, through Met Éireann.

Coastal change is a significant issue and the OPW has been to the forefront in leading the debate for a national strategy to be put in place to address the impact of rising sea levels, increasing storm events in our coastal areas. The OPW is co-chairing the interdepartmental group on national coastal change management strategy with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The membership of this group includes a wide representation from across Departments. This group is to bring forward options and recommendations for consideration by the Government to deal with coastal change and the development of a national coastal change policy.

My colleagues, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, recently commenced a public consultation on the draft river basin management plan for Ireland 2022 to 2027. There are a number of features of the draft plan and measures proposed that are relevant to the issues raised in the motion before us tonight. The core themes include an increased level of ambition reflecting the high level of environmental ambitions contained in the programme for Government; continuing and strengthening the integrated catchment planning approach nationally, covering all 46 hydrometric catchments; further improvements in the level of co-ordination and collaboration by

all implementing bodies; and the delivery of multiple benefits. Many of the measures needed to protect and improve water quality, including the water framework directive, can also deliver benefits.

Nature-based solutions, such as green and blue infrastructure, are recognised in the draft river basin management plan as having significant potential to contribute to mitigating pollutants, as Senator Burke referred to, in inputs to waters in rural areas but also in addressing many of the complex environmental challenges that are associated with balancing urban development and its impact on the environment. The programme for Government includes a commitment that the Government will undertake a national land use review, including farmland, forests, and peatlands, so that optimal land use options inform all Government decisions.

I will conclude by assuring Senators that the Government and I are working extremely hard to ensure that the greatest possible progress is being made on the delivery of a very ambitious programme of work for flood defences nationally. The biggest frustration I have was referred to by Senators Kyne and Cummins and others. It is the speed at which we are able to deliver to communities. Senator Kyne asked if anything can be done to make my job easier and the greatest level of difficulty we have is around the process. It is not around the delivery of engineering in schemes at all. Most of the work in delivering the scheme in Galway, for example, will not be at the site at the Claddagh. It will be spent in offices, the courts and judicial reviews. No more than on the television programme, there comes a point in this country where we have to ask if the public good is being served in the courts or on the quayside in the Claddagh. As legislators, we have to ask ourselves whether we are doing the public good by continually having a “Wanderly Wagon” circuit of Ireland where people can go in and out of court without, in my estimation, any real *locus standi*, to object to, frustrate and prevent ordinary decent citizens from having access to a night’s sleep. That is what they want - a night’s sleep. They are agitated in their beds at night because they do not know when the sea or the River Suir will come in because somebody 300 km or 400 km away can object in the name of a bullrush, a weed or something. That has to stop.

This House and the Dáil are failing people throughout Ireland. I have to admit that we are failing people all over this country. This process is going on in Cork city for 14 years and for 19 years in Enniscorthy. The Senator’s city will probably go on for ten years, as will Senator Malcolm Byrne’s. How long before enough is enough, when the Atlantic will rise by a metre at the same time? We have to ask ourselves at what point will enough be enough and at what stage the public good is served ahead of another good. The rights and hierarchies in this country have to be ultimately established as to where the balance of rights is and whose rights outweigh those of others.

I could be in this Chamber again in another six months’ time, talking about the Claddagh, Dunmore East, King’s Island and the Shannon Callows. We can talk about it until the cows come home, but the greatest level of frustration I have is with what the OPW cannot do. When I hear people saying we are openly breaking the law, on behalf of the men and women who work for the OPW, I have to take offence at that. I take offence not only on behalf of the men and the women who work for the OPW, and the Senator is not here now, but on behalf of those who work for the local authorities. Nobody that I know in a council or in the OPW actively goes out in the morning to break the law. If that Senator has detailed knowledge of somebody who works in the OPW who intentionally broke the law, she should come to the Chamber and give me the details of it.

My frustration stems from the fact that all I want to be able to do is look someone in the eye in the Claddagh, Ballinasloe or Roscommon and say that that person can sleep in his or her bed tonight because the water will not come in. This country is failing those people because of a legislative basis that rates something other than people's right to sleep in their houses at night, and to keep out the water, behind something else. We have failed those people and until we as legislators grapple with that, we are only coddling ourselves about how I will not be able to spend that money.

Senator Róisín Garvey: This was a very good debate, which does not always happen. Sometimes debates are very polarised but this was a good one. It was great to have all parties on both sides of the House, and Independents, all supporting the motion without any amendments. I thank the Minister of State for his time. We have been here for a couple of hours now and he has listened with great patience.

Rivers have routes and so must our plans for dealing with flooding. The Minister of State has done well to state in a nutshell what needs to be done. I do not know about court cases and I do not want to get involved in any of that stuff. I did not come here today to take sides on anything like that. I know we need catchment-based solutions and that they can save us money. Research is being done and the EPA's, Slow the Flow, sounds very good. I do not hear a lot about engaging with communities to get reforestation, build natural dam systems and use hard engineering upstream to capture the water and slow down its speed and volume. It may be happening in phases, or it may be a new thing, but these are the kind of stories we need to be able to tell people and to cite as solutions so it does not turn into this big polarised thing, where all hard engineering is bad and all nature-based solutions will sort out all the problems. It is much more nuanced than that, which I said in my speech, despite some people asserting that I said we should stop draining and hard engineering. I made it very clear that we need all of it, but we need it all to be done well and in the right places.

There are some great NGOs that work on water issues, such as the social work access network, SWAN, and the environmental pillar has great expertise. We are legislators, not experts, and we, and our civil servants, sometimes need to step back and say we do not always know everything, which is okay. We are not supposed to know everything and we are allowed to bring experts in. As the Minister of State mentioned, hydrologists are coming in. We need to listen to people. We have some people in NGOs who have been at this craic for 30 years and they are major experts. I often ring Professor John Sweeney because he knows what he is talking about. Before I wrote this motion, I spoke with several scientists and some of the Minister of State's staff and his special adviser, who were also very helpful.

We have to work together. It is divisive and unhelpful to talk about being against hard engineering or drainage. Time is running out and we have to come together. I do not care who gets the kudos for it, but we have to do this. As the Minister of State said, people are worrying in their beds. Hard engineering is being looked at in Cork and Senator Cummins mentioned Waterford, but these places are at the mouths of rivers. One has to wonder, if we started catchment-based solutions ten years ago, would all the problems have accumulated at the mouths of rivers, which is where rivers end? It begs the question that if we had had catchment-based solutions in the past, would all the problems have landed in Cork and Waterford, for example? It puts it out there that we have not done enough.

Nature has many solutions and we have to admit we have made a mess of the past. We have made huge drains that may not have been in the right places. The best experts are saying that

the cessation of drainage of wetlands and peatlands, and the rewetting of peatlands, are the measures that have the biggest effect in reducing flooding, increasing biodiversity and in climate mitigation and adaptation. If we work together, we can come up with a plan for this country. It is now a flooding emergency and we should take into account hard engineering and nature-based solutions. If we do so, we can do it at a fraction of the cost. The land use review, which has never been done before, is vitally important, as is the river management plan and looking at the solutions they bring about. The latter is open for public consultation at the moment and both will lead us to move forward in a better way.

I do not envy the Minister of State his task. It would not be fair for everybody to blame him for all the flooding issues or for hard engineering or something like that. We have to admit sometimes that we do not now know everything and we have to find the best way forward. I firmly believe the route solutions will work if we follow the routes of the rivers from beginning to end. I have seen hard engineering being used alone and, as Senator Kyne said, it can move from one part of a town to another. As I said, I saw it in Ennis. We kayaked down one street, the wall was raised and we kayaked down the street next door. That was 15 years ago now and I hope we have evolved since then.

We have much more work to do. Much more time and investment in nature-based and catchment-based solutions is needed that will incorporate hard and soft engineering and will engage communities, which are crying out for help. The Maharees community, which is an amazing group created by Martha Farrell, did not want hard engineering to ruin their dune system. They came together as a community, replanted the grasses there and completely resolved the issue. That was community-led. The group looked for supports for that, which I think they got from Clean Coasts and others. As legislators, people will look to us more and more to see what the solutions are for them, be it for their farms, towns or villages. We will have to be there for those people as we face the consequences of climate change. I thank the Minister of State for his time and I thank everybody for their support.

Question put and agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Seán Kyne: Tomorrow at 10.30 a.m.

The Seanad adjourned at 8.29 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 20 October 2021.