



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 25 Eanáir 2022

Tuesday, 25 January 2022

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 Tim Lombard that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to make a statement on whether the public spending code ensures the taxpayer is getting value for money from publicly funded projects.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the campaign by the Neurological Alliance of Ireland for 100 additional neurology nurse specialists throughout Ireland, including at St. Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the national roll-out of first responder training to all Garda districts, including the provision by the National Ambulance Service of automated external defibrillators, AEDs, to all Garda vehicles.

I have also received notice from Senators Aisling Dolan and Micheál Carrigy of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education to make a statement on the most recent consultation with the advisory group on planning for State examinations 2022.

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to establish a centralised human resources system to deal with serious disciplinary issues within local authorities.

I have also received notice from Senator Martin Conway of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to introduce a requirement that applicants for tree felling licenses be subject to a road condition survey.

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

The need for the Minister for Justice to ensure that the Stardust inquest will be held before a jury.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement and provide an update on the implementation of the report on the national psychology project team on the establishment of a national psychology placement office and workforce planning.

Of the matters raised by the Senators suitable for discussion, I have selected Senators Lombard, Boyhan, Gallagher and Dolan and Carrigy, who will be sharing their time, and they will be taken now. I regret that I had to rule out of order the matters raised by Senators Ahearn and Boylan on the ground that the relevant Ministers have no official responsibility in those areas. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Public Procurement Contracts

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, to the House.

Senator Tim Lombard: I welcome the Minister of State. I also would like to acknowledge the office of the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, which made contact with my own office this morning about this Commencement matter. I tabled this Commencement matter to ask the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to make a statement on how the public spending code ensures that taxpayers get greater value for money from publicly funded projects. It is a real issue to make sure that we get bang for our buck when it comes to publicly-funded projects. These are very significant funds that the State is pumping into Government agencies. We need to make sure that Government agencies deliver on the ability to have these major projects delivered. We have huge sums of money given, in particular, to local authorities. How the public spending code deals with local authorities is a real issue of concern for many people.

I raise this issue on the back of a huge issue we have in my own part of the world where our only public pool, which is in Dunmanway, received €5.5 million four years ago. It has been running at half capacity ever since. To give an example, other public pools in the county will be open up to 60 or 70 hours every week. We have 25 hours every week in Dunmanway. This is a state-of-the-art complex that has a 25 m pool, a jacuzzi and a gym, all funded by the State coffers, and yet it is still running at half capacity. It runs five days a week, from 11 a.m. until 5

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p.m., and not on Sundays. This is our money being spent on a public project and the public is not getting value for money.

We have swimming clubs that have not had lessons in two years. We have a huge issue in my part of the world. The Minister of State has visited west Cork and knows it is an area where we have access to water all the way along. For parents to not have access to swimming lessons for over two years is an absolute disgrace.

I am trying to work out where national government fits in. Where does the public spending code fit in to make sure that we get value for money when we give money to local authorities? The local authorities seem to be running around on this issue and have not done anything in the past four years regarding making sure the services that are required in the community are delivered.

We have often seen the call that we need more money for infrastructure and we need to have these projects delivered on. We have the money, we have had the infrastructure built and now we do not have access to it. That is a significant bugbear for so many people. Unless we have due accountability for the moneys that we give to local authorities, we will continue to have this mess. It is a significant issue.

Can the Minister of State elaborate on where the buck stops? Who controls it? Where is the auditor regarding making sure that the investment the State makes on behalf of the Irish people into these publicly-funded projects means they are actually open to the public? That is the crux of the matter. Many Deputies and Senators in west Cork have been going around in circles, trying to get this pool opened. We now need to make sure there is accountability regarding the money spent. Where is the line of command and who can give us that accountability?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank Senator Lombard for raising this Commencement matter. I am delighted to hear that the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, has made contact with him. I will read the script provided in response to the matter raised.

Delivering greater value for money in the expenditure of public funds is a key element of all public investment policy. Efficient public capital investment means quality investment decisions supported by robust evidence and analysis to maximise outcome for limited public resources. The management and delivery of investment projects and public services within allocation is a key responsibility of every Department and Minister. It is important to note that this is not a static space and public bodies are continually working to improve processes and frameworks to ensure value for money.

The public spending code is the tool used by Government to evaluate the consequences of the capital investment decisions it makes. The code was updated in December 2019 following an extensive consultation process involving engagement with over 150 public officials and a review of international best practice. The update code also incorporated lessons learned in Ireland on a wide range of projects such as those outlined in the PricewaterhouseCoopers, PwC, review of the national children's hospital, which recommended the following: the rules that govern public sector spending should be strengthened; the standards to which business cases are presented should be more clearly defined; and a central assurance and challenge function should provide a consistent challenge to and review of major projects throughout their lifecycle, which I think is the issue the Senator brings to the fore today.

As well as implementing these recommendations, the updated guidance better aligns with the realities of the project delivery, with a particular focus on improved appraisal, cost estimation and management. The public spending code is grounded in the principle of proportionality. The resources and time to be spent on project preparation must be commensurate with the nature, cost and complexity of the investment. All the evidence shows that the greatest impact on improving project outcome comes from the careful project preparation. The more work that is done on the earlier stages leads to more considered decisions on projects. At the same time, there is a need to balance project preparation with the imperative of delivering critical infrastructure. Accordingly, the update to the code streamlines the process for smaller projects. This can speed up project delivery. In addition, the code specifically refers to sectors such as housing and urban regeneration, whereby policy interventions can be appraised on a programme-wide basis without the need to assess every project on scheme individually.

The update of the code in 2019 highlighted the need for more structured scrutiny on major public investment projects, particularly in the areas of planned delivery, costings and risk. This is to ensure that the Government is making decisions with a full picture of the proposal, its costs, risks and benefits. The majority of public investment projects are delivered on budget and on time. There is a high level of professionalism across the various sectors. However, we have also recognised the higher risk profile of larger projects and introduced a new procedure for projects with an estimated cost of over €100 million in order to improve project outcomes, avoid cost overruns and reduce the risk of delay in delivery.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has put in place an external assurance process to provide independent project scrutiny at key decision stages. This will involve independent expert review of two key points in the project lifecycle under the public spending code - approval in principle and prior to tender - focusing on issues such as cost, risk and ability to deliver. This process will improve value for money and support funding Departments and Government with expert insight relating to project risks, delivery feasibility and robustness of costings, governance and procurement.

To support the external assurance process a new major project advisory group has been established to further strengthen project management. As a prerequisite to seeking Government approval for projects at the relevant decision gates, project proposals and external reviews will be scrutinised by the advisory group in advance of the decision to proceed. The new arrangements bring Ireland into line with leading international best practice and meet a recommendation of the IMF's public investment management assessment of Ireland. It should be noted that timelines associated with public spending code compliance are a fraction of the times required for compliance with a range of statutory requirements.

I am not sure if that response has answered the Senator's question.

Senator Tim Lombard: I thank the Minister of State for the response. The key issue is not if, following completion of the processes with regard to cost, analysis and so on, a project will be affordable, but whether it will be open to the public. That is the fall down in terms of the public spending code. There is no follow-up. We do not know exactly how much activity has been created because of a project and how much availability is going to be there.

There is also a huge issue with who is accountable when it comes to local government. There are other members in this forum that have a view on it too. They do not come before the Committee of Public Accounts. They do not have a remit before it. Until we actually have local

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authorities brought before that committee we will not have true auditors ensuring we get value for money when it comes to these issues.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I again thank the Senator for raising an important issue for the successful delivery of State investment and ensuring maximum value for the taxpayer. It is important to have dialogue and engagement on something so key for Government delivery.

As I mentioned in my earlier remarks, this is not a static space and public bodies are continuously working to improve processes and frameworks to ensure value for money. The update of the code in 2019 was done in the context of many lessons learned here in Ireland, including the national children's hospital and also international guidance through a review of the investment framework by the International Monetary Fund. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform continues to work with colleagues from other Departments and agencies to refine the requirements of the overall public spending codes to produce sectoral guidance that is more applicable in specific areas. The appropriateness and proportionality that was adopted in the recent update of the public spending code means the process of projects of less than €100 million have been streamlined. It should lead to a speeding-up of project delivery.

I will bring this back to the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath. The crux of the Senator's Commencement matter today was about having the accountability and the cost-benefit analysis to know that the project has an impact on the general public when it is delivered.

Hospital Staff

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I have always said this Government will be very much judged on its track record and delivery in health and housing. I think we all know that.

I will focus on one simple measure concerning health. It is in response to an email every Deputy, Senator and Minister received from the Neurological Alliance of Ireland, NAI, campaign for 100 extra nurses in neurology. Patients are waiting too long for diagnosis and treatment and I think the Minister of State and I, and everyone, agrees on that. As an example, consider St. Vincent's University Hospital, which is one of the bigger focuses and the key aspect of this campaign, albeit a national campaign. Based on the catchment area of St. Vincent's, national and international guidelines recommend there should be 22 neurology nurse specialists there but there are only four. Patients deserve better. I believe that and the Minister of State does too.

Investing in more neurology nurses is a cost-efficient way of improving efficiencies and outpatient clinics, reducing waiting times and ensuring patients have access to specialist supports they need to manage their conditions. Patients with access to neurology nurses have reported improved psychological well-being, improved sense of involvement in their care and in their pathways for care, and the preparation for the tests and the investigations that are especially necessary for this specific area of medicine. More neurology nurses will also ensure patients get quicker access to outpatient appointments, thereby reducing waiting lists, and based on their deteriorating condition. I support the NAI's campaign for 100 extra nurses specialising in this area, including 17 extra nurses for St. Vincent's. I ask the Minister of State to do the same.

There was a chart published of nursing numbers per hospital which makes for very interest-

ing reading. I will read it into the record. The recommended number of nurses for Beaumont Hospital is 15 whereas it currently has ten. The recommended number of nurses for Cork University Hospital is 20 whereas it currently has four. The recommended number of nurses for the Mater Hospital is 14 whereas it currently has six. The recommended number of nurses for Sligo University Hospital is seven whereas it currently has three. The recommended number of nurses for St. James's Hospital is 14 whereas it currently has only four. The recommended number of nurses for St. Vincent's Hospital is 22 whereas it currently has only four. The recommended number of nurses for Tallaght Hospital is 20 whereas it currently has only 15.

University Hospital Galway will be of particular interest to the Minister of State. The recommended number of nurses there is 13 but only four are in place. The recommended number of nurses for the University Hospital Limerick is 11 whereas it currently has three. University Hospital Waterford is really disappointing. The recommended number of nurses is six and there are none in place. Those are the facts. I am happy to share that with the Minister of State.

We are all on board. It is a case of how we are going to achieve this and support them. I am only here today to shine a light on this issue on behalf of the Neurological Alliance of Ireland. I would be interested in the Minister of State's feedback.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank Senator Boyhan for raising this particularly important matter. I am taking it on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly. The script I will read was prepared by his Department. I also take the opportunity to acknowledge the work and the role played by neurological nurse specialists. They play an important role in triaging, assessing, and providing ongoing support to neurological patients. This in turn builds capacity within neurological services and allows for more timely access to efficient, equitable and quality care.

I am advised that the HSE's national clinical programme for neurology, NCPN, in conjunction with the Neurological Alliance of Ireland, NAI, completed an all-Ireland survey of neurological services in 2020. This survey confirmed that all neurological centres have access to a designated clinical nurse specialist or advanced nurse practitioner, recognising the value that skilled and highly trained nursing staff add to neurological services. The HSE has advised that plans will be developed to incrementally increase the overall numbers of nurse specialists.

The NCPN continues to engage regularly with patient organisations and the NAI to establish ways to promote neurology nurse specialists. It is focusing its current work streams and initiatives around nurse-led clinics, nurse-liaison services and outreach programs. Examples of this include the headache programme and the epilepsy outreach programme, both of which are funded under the Sláintecare innovation fund. These programmes reconfigure the management of these conditions, enabling clinical nurse specialists and advanced nurse practitioners to lead and co-ordinate the care of these conditions in the community. This reduces reliance on consultant neurologists and tertiary services, which, in turn, reduces waiting lists and allows more timely access to services and improves the overall quality of care.

The HSE has advised that the neurology department in St. Vincent's University Hospital provides regional services in all aspects of general neurology including migraine and epilepsy services in addition to tertiary services for people with multiple sclerosis, cognitive disorders, dystonia and movement disorders and Parkinson's disease. The neurology Department offers an inpatient, outpatient and consultation service.

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The HSE has further advised that there are currently ten specialist nursing positions in neurology in St. Vincent's, of which nine are in post. It is hoped that the post of advanced nurse practitioner in multiple sclerosis will be filled very soon. The Government, along with the Department of Health, is fully committed to improving patient services and having patient-centred care in St Vincent's and across the country. That commitment is, I strongly suggest, reflected in the unprecedented level of funding that is being targeted right across the health service in recent budgets and again in budget 2022. Since the end of 2019 the health sector has grown by a total of 12,506 whole-time equivalents, WTEs. The largest area of growth has been in nursing and midwifery, with an additional 3,372 WTE posts.

I am assured that the HSE remains committed to the progressive development of neurology services and, specifically, to improving this service for patients of St. Vincent's University Hospital and the surrounding areas.

Senator Victor Boyhan: With all due respect, I fully appreciate that the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is taking the matter for the Minister for Health. The reality is that we have to look at what is on the ground. Today, I have called out ten hospitals individually. We were told what was recommended and what is the current status. The reality is that currently there are 41.5 nurse specialists in those ten hospitals when the recommendation is that there would be 142. The simple ask by this association is for 100 nurses. We can have all the commitments, aspirations and hopes, and we can have lectures and history classes about what happened two years ago, but today in January 2022 I am standing here to make a strong case to the Government that we revisit this campaign and that we all take the time to engage. Everyone is being asked to sign up to the online petition in support of the campaign. The current status is that it is up there online. I can only take what these practitioners and this association is telling me. There is a shortfall. They want 100 specialist nurses. They do not want the promise of them or the HSE talking about goodwill, commitment and aspiration. We want them on the ground and we want them treating our patients. I know the Minister of State is committed to that. I do not doubt that. However, we need to keep the pressure on and then, in two months' time, to come back in here and ask the Minister if he can say he is delivering. It is not about money in place or resources but about staff, specialist nurses, being in place. I thank the Minister of State for taking the question on behalf of the Minister for Health.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: This is not a history lesson but I reiterate that the Department of Health is committed to improving services in line with Sláintecare. Covid-19 did bring a range of serious challenges to our health services and its workforce. The unprecedented level of investment in our health service in recent years is testament to the commitment of this Government.

I will go back to the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and ask him what is the commitment on the bespoke recruitment campaign in order to ensure that while funding is in place, the staff can be put into their allocated posts. The question here for the HSE is around the recruitment but I know the Government's commitment in respect of its funding. It is no different to the situation with Alzheimer nurses some years ago. There were only four but that has grown and grown because a bespoke campaign was put in place. I will bring the Senator's sentiments to the Minister.

Seanad Éireann
First Aid Training

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and wish to pay tribute to her publicly for the great work she is doing in her portfolio. I knew when she was appointed that she would grasp it by the scruff of the neck and she is doing so. I commend her on her good work and wish her good health to keep it all going.

I wish to pay tribute to the many communities throughout the length and breadth of the country who have been fundraising for defibrillators, that is, automated external defibrillators, AEDs, and installing them in many community facilities such as GAA and soccer grounds, as well as schools and business premises. Their availability mean that more people need to be trained. To all the volunteers who have given up their time to become first responders I pay tribute. They are a credit to themselves, their families and their communities for their responsibility to and solidarity with their communities. I was particularly impressed by an initiative undertaken in the Buncrana Garda district recently where the National Ambulance Service provided cardiac first response training to members of that Garda district. All of the members took it up. As a result the National Ambulance Service installed a defibrillator in every single Garda vehicle, including a motorcycle, in that district. It is an initiative that I would like to see rolled out throughout the country. It makes perfect sense that those who are first tasked as emergency responders, that is, members of An Garda Síochána, who respond in emergency situations would have the equipment in their vehicles to be able to assist those in a cardiac arrest situation but also that they would have had adequate training to be able to use that device. It is a simple situation that could be life or death. Members of the Garda are on the ground 24-7 and in fairness to them, they respond as quickly as they possibly can. It is an excellent initiative that I would like to see rolled out. I believe that training in basic first aid and cardiac first response is something that should be universal and that we should begin it in schools. I introduced a Bill in the last Seanad on first aid and mental health first aid in order that individuals could be trained from the get-go and we would not have to do it retrospectively.

I not only commend members of the Garda in the Buncrana district but also the National Ambulance Service personnel in Donegal for taking this initiative. They have set an example which could and should be followed up by every Garda district in the country. I hope that the Minister of State will use her good offices and consult with the Minister for Health to see how, in conjunction with the Department of Justice, we could roll out this initiative.

3 o'clock

It is a simple initiative but one that could prove a matter of life and death to some poor unfortunate individual.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I welcome the opportunity to address the House on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, about the work under way as part of the out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy with regard to the training and deployment of automated external defibrillators, AEDs. I thank the Senator for using his time to raise this matter so we can have a conversation about it and make the wider public aware of the great work that is going on.

Community first responders are trained volunteers who are co-ordinated and dispatched by the National Ambulance Service to attend actual or potentially life-threatening emergencies. As these volunteers are professionally trained in CPR and the use of defibrillators, they can respond to certain medical emergency calls in the community in those important first few

minutes prior to the arrival of an emergency ambulance. Community first responder groups, An Garda Síochána, emergency services personnel, fire services personnel, health services staff and other organisations all play a key role in saving lives and responding to out-of-hospital cardiac emergencies.

As the Senator may be aware, the HSE is currently in the implementation phase of the out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy for Ireland. This strategy was developed by an interdisciplinary steering group, which had the aim of increasing the number of people who survive an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest in Ireland, using national and international experience to address all the elements in the chain of survival. The HSE has since established an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy implementation group to progress this work. The group is led by the National Ambulance Service and actions are being progressed by partner organisations, including Dublin Fire Brigade, the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council, the Irish Heart Foundation, and as the Senator noted, An Garda Síochána. At present, the National Ambulance Service has a list of locations for more than 2,000 AEDs on its national computer-aided dispatch system which it can use to advise emergency callers, although this is in its infancy.

The most important thing the Senator raised is that, following the pandemic, not everyone within the voluntary organisations has returned to the role of being a first responder. Therefore, the National Ambulance Service has been looking at other ways of equipping people to become first responders because time is critical in these situations. We have seen that in Donegal and in what the Senator said with regard to An Garda Síochána. There is a strategy and a very clear plan to roll it out but it is important that we roll it out at pace. That is for the simple reason that there is a deficit in the number of community first responders at this moment in time. It is important that, where we know there is a deficit, the National Ambulance Service works with the local fire brigade or An Garda Síochána to train and equip them, so there are no gaps left in any communities across the country.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I thank the Minister of State for her comprehensive response on behalf of the Minister for Health. I am delighted that there are moves afoot to roll this out at a national level. As the Minister of State said, the most important thing is to roll it out with pace. That is vitally important. We have great community volunteers who volunteer in cardiac arrest situations with defibrillators but for one reason or another the logistics of getting them out to a remote location might prove difficult. The Garda is on the scene 24-7 in an emergency situation and it makes perfect sense for every Garda vehicle to be equipped with a defibrillator or an AED and that every single member of the Garda would be trained to use it. I look forward to this initiative being rolled out throughout the country as soon as practically possible.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I again thank the Senator for raising this issue and giving us the chance to speak about the continued implementation of the out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy. Good progress was made during 2021 on the implementation of the strategy, supported by Government funding, and it is my expectation that progress will continue in 2022. In particular, the National Ambulance Service, via the out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy, continues to advance development of a national AED register, which will enable the service's national emergency operations centre to locate all publicly accessible defibrillators when it receives a 999 or 112 call. Out-of-hospital cardiac arrest is a significant source of mortality and morbidity, with a wide variation in its reported incidence and outcomes globally. Research has shown us it takes an entire system to save a life, which is why a strategic whole-nation approach is planned. Improving out-of-hospital cardiac arrest survival is essential.

Seanad Éireann
State Examinations

Acting Chairperson (Senator Annie Hoey): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome the Minister of State, who is here on behalf of the Minister for Education. I will share time with Senator Carrigy.

There is much concern and anxiety among parents and leaving certificate students, especially given the number of absences due to Covid-19 infection or close-contact status. It has been a big issue over recent months, particularly because of the Omicron variant, for both teachers and students alike. Meetings were held last week, on 20 January, with the advisory group on planning for State examinations for leaving certificate 2022 and further bilateral meetings with stakeholder groups are being held into this week. It is now 25 January, and clear guidance is required for parents, students and teaching staff. When will there be a decision on leaving certificate 2022?

An increase of more than fivefold in CAO maximum point scores has been reported over recent years and there is significant pressure on college places. There is a disparity between standard exams and accredited grades and this is putting courses out of reach for students as points increase. A lottery system faces students. What supports are in place for this year's cohort of students, who more than most have been impacted since March 2020 when they were in their junior certificate year? They may not yet have completed any State exams.

Students and parent advisory groups have reached out regarding this stress and anxiety. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has brought forward changes to the CAO form, which now includes both further and higher education options and apprenticeship places, increasing young people's options to reach their career of choice. There are also a further 6,000 places, intended to reduce pressure on the points system over the next two years. What are we going to do this year? We are reaching capacity in higher education.

Leaving certificate reform is well overdue and we need it now. When will the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA's, final advisory report on senior cycle reform be published? Continuous assessment options apply only to 60% of subject choices but they should apply to all of them. Like my party colleague Senator Carrigy, I have received reports that the National Parents Council, which is represented on the advisory group for post-primary, does not represent all parents. He will develop this point.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I welcome the Minister of State. I concur with the comments made by Senator Dolan relating to the leaving certificate. As she said, the advisory group met recently to discuss proposals. One group that is represented on the advisory group is the National Parents Council Post Primary, which comprises the Catholic Secondary Schools Parent Associations, CSSPA, representing 342 schools, or 40% of the total; the Education and Training Board Schools National Parents Association, representing 271 schools; the National Association of Compass, which represents 22 schools that promote Protestant or minority religions; and the Parents Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, which represents 91 schools.

The NPC does not represent all the smaller organisations within it, which means not all par-

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ents in all schools are represented. This issue has been raised with me in my home county of Longford by representatives and parents, who have stated they are not getting the opportunity to feed in their views to the discussions that are taking place. We need an organisation that represents all parents' views, and the people who are members of that organisation need to be parents themselves in order that they can understand the issues that exist for youngsters on the ground.

In a letter issued roughly 12 months ago, the executive of the CSSPA expressed a lack of confidence in the leadership of the National Parents Council. This issue has been ongoing for 12 months. I raised it about nine months ago and it seems to be persisting. We need an organisation that represents all the parents in all of the schools throughout the country when these important discussions take place.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank Senators Aisling Dolan and Micheál Carrigy for raising this very important matter and allowing me the opportunity to address same.

The Department and the State Examinations Commission have been progressing and planning for the 2022 junior cycle and leaving certificate examinations. This has been done in consultation with the advisory group on planning for the State examinations and with public health.

Both the National Parents Council post-primary and primary are represented on the advisory group, and I will come back to the point that both Senators have made in terms of that aspect. Other members of the group include representatives of students, teachers and school leaders, and representatives of the State Examinations Commission, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, higher education and the Department.

The Department is aware that the leaving certificate experience for the class of 2022 has been disruptive. The State Examinations Commission, working with the Department, has sought through a range of measures to take account of the disruption to learning experienced by these students. These measures include the following: adjustments to the assessment arrangements for the 2022 State examinations that were announced in August 2021. These adjustments were designed to take account both of the disruption to learning experienced by students in the early part of 2021, as well as providing for some possible further disruption in 2021-2022; revised arrangements for leaving certificate oral language examinations, and the performance tests in leaving certificate music. These examinations will take place outside of school time over the first week of the school Easter holidays, and will minimise disruption to teaching and learning; and pushing out of the timeframe for certain assessment elements of the leaving certificate applied examinations. Schools were also reminded of the flexibility available regarding the dates for the completion and authentication of leaving certificate course work.

The Minister also announced that an alternative set of leaving certificate examinations will be run in 2022 and shortly after the conclusion of the main set of examinations. This will be for students who are unable to sit the main set of examinations for various reasons, including Covid-19 illness, bereavement or serious illness.

The Department has also made available guidance materials to enable schools to mediate the curriculum safely for all pupils or students in a Covid-19 context. This includes information on well-being supports for leaving certificate students. It includes a series of supports on managing well-being, coping with uncertainty and managing stress and anxiety, developed by the National Educational Psychological Service in the Department.

The Department continues to engage with all partners in education on all matters relating to leaving certificate 2022 examinations. The advisory group on State examinations, as both Senators know and stated, met on Thursday last, 20 January. A number of updates were received from group members, including reports of results from surveys of their members that were conducted by some bodies. The issue of grade inflation was also raised. The meeting was positive and collaborative with all parties committed to continued engagement in the short period ahead in order to provide clarity in relation to State examinations 2022. It was agreed that the members of the group would reflect on the contributions made at the meeting, and that engagement would continue between the Minister and the stakeholders on a bilateral basis. The bilateral engagement has been continuing since late last week and over the weekend. It is planned that a further meeting of the advisory group will be held in the coming days.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I thank the Minister of State. I will share my response time with Senator Carrigy.

When are we going to have a response in regard to the leaving certificate? As the Minister of State mentioned, the advisory group will meet in the next few days but when will we have a decision for these parents and students?

In terms of my comments and the issue raised by Senator Carrigy, the Catholic Secondary Schools Parents Association and the Education and Training Board Schools National Parents' Association are not represented within the National Parents Council post-primary. That means no parents of students in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, are represented in the group making the decision around the leaving certificate 2022.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I concur with the comments made by Senator Dolan. We need a decision in the next week. Parents and children have contacted us as public representatives and I am sure they have contacted the Minister of State. We want a final decision to be made in the next two to three days as it would let everyone know where they stand. I would prefer a hybrid model but that may not be attainable due the junior certificate having been sat, so we need to put an alternative leaving certificate in place for students. We have to take into account the fact they have not had two years of consecutive learning. It cannot go back to the old model.

Deputy Niall Collins: The points the Senators have raised are very valid. The Taoiseach said in the Dáil today that he met the senior statistician in the Department of Education and the Minister for Education yesterday. It is a complex issue as the Senators know. There are two cohorts within this year's leaving certificate; some who sat the junior certificate and some who did not sit it. That throws up a lot of complexities and the Senators understand that. That is part of what has to be worked through in arriving at a decision. I cannot say when we will have a decision. I have been asked that every day in recent weeks but it will be an early decision. We had a decision on this at the end of February last year and we are now coming towards the end of January of this year. We will have a decision far earlier this year than we had last year and that clarity will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

I refer to the good points the Senators made on representation for parents and I will bring that to the Minister after this session. I was not aware of that dynamic within the representative groups. I will bring what the Senators have highlighted and articulated to the Minister for her direct attention.

Sitting suspended at 3.16 p.m. and resumed at 3.30 p.m.

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An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Regina Doherty: The Order of Business is No. *a1* on the Supplementary Order Paper, report of the Committee of Selection, to be taken on conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; No. 1, motion regarding Fisheries (Commercial Fishing Licences) (Alteration of Duties and Fees) Order 2022, referral to committee, to be taken on conclusion of No. *a1* without debate; and No. 2, statements on climate and agriculture, to be taken at 5 p.m. and to conclude at 7 p.m., with the opening contribution of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, and all other Senators not to exceed five minutes, with the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Most in this House will agree that, in the words of the Taoiseach, Friday was a good day. The extraordinary vaccination programme and its success led us to where we are. There may be a few twists and turns yet but there is an air of optimism around the country. I know plenty of people who abandoned their plans for dry January over the weekend, after the difficulties that we have had. We have spoken often in this House about hospitality, tourism, the arts, live events and the entertainment sector. It is important that we give our support to them. I ask that we consider replacing the Government advertising campaign, which tells us that restrictions have been lifted, with encouragement to people who are in a position to do so to go out and support their local bars and restaurants and to buy tickets to the theatre or a gig, stating that it is their patriotic duty to do so.

We need to recognise the sacrifices that young people have made, which we have talked about in this House. We now need to give young people their freedoms back, because they have missed out on two formative years of their lives. We have to be conscious, within our education system, that a certain number of young people have been left behind over the last two years. We have to put supports in place to make sure that this does not become a long-term issue. We raised this with the Minister, Deputy Foley, last week.

I have a question about the online safety and media regulation Bill. It will soon come before the House. The Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media recommended, and the Minister accepted, the establishment of an online safety commissioner. We would like to see the introduction of an individual complaints mechanism. The Minister is committed and will recruit the online safety commissioner. With regard to the individual complaints mechanism, she has appointed a panel of six to look at how this mechanism might operate. That in itself is welcome. The Minister has required the panel to report within 90 days. I hope it will look at international models. The Joint Committee on Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht wanted it to look at the Australian eSafety Commissioner model, which has been successfully operating for six years.

My worry relates to the terms of reference given to the six persons appointed to the panel. To be honest, in many ways it is being set up with the possibility that the system will fail. The language used includes that the panel is to “consider the scope of such a scheme, taking into account the nature and volume of online content and the overall purpose of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill.” While we accept that a threshold must be established, I am concerned that the joint committee was not consulted about the terms of reference for this expert group. I ask the Leader, on behalf of the House, to seek assurances from the Minister that she remains committed to the process.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the announcement yesterday by the Minister for

Transport, Deputy Ryan, on active travel funding. Some €289 million is being spent on walking and cycling across the country. Tipperary was successful and secured €6.6 million, which is very welcome. However, as I stated last week, it is extremely frustrating for us to be told before Christmas that the N24 road project from Cahir to Waterford was being shelved because of a lack of funding. The Department of Transport has lots of money. All we were asking for was €1.5 million to continue the design phase of a strategic route between Limerick and Waterford. I ask the Minister to reflect on that decision, reverse it and continue the investment in the design stage of the N24. It is a key project which needs to be supported. It is all well and good to give €170 million to the greater Dublin area. We are asking for only €1.5 million to continue a road project which is hugely important.

At the weekend, I went to apply for a passport for my two-year-old son's first passport. I visited a pharmacy to get his photograph taken. There was a queue in the pharmacy of people getting pictures, predominantly for young children. I then went to the Garda station with my wife to sign a consent as a guardian. The garda said the station had been inundated with people looking for passports. I then went to the post office where I had the exact same conversation. There is huge excitement with the country reopening. Part of that excitement is people looking forward to the opportunity to travel in the summer. In the next number of weeks, public representatives will be inundated with questions about passports. If we thought it was bad a couple of months ago, the queries will skyrocket in the coming months. In 2020, 450,000 passports were issued. In 2019, which is probably the best barometer, 900,000 passports were issued. It is expected that between 1.3 million and 1.7 million passports will be delivered this year. The majority of those are processed in January and February each year but that will increase this year on the back of the announcement last week and Government advertising on applying for passports.

I welcome that the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, is increasing Passport Office staff by 300, from 600 to 900. That is a 50% increase in staff but we have a threefold or fourfold increase in passports. I ask the Leader to ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs to come to the House to talk about passports as a priority this year in supporting sectors such as aviation as well as travel agencies which have had a difficult two years. I also ask that the appointment of the additional 300 staff in the Passport Office happen immediately. We should look at introducing a seven-day rather than five-day roster system in the Passport Office. This needs to be treated as an emergency in the coming months to ensure that everyone who wants a passport can get one in time in order that we can support the aviation industry and travel agencies and get back to normality.

An Cathaoirleach: That may be a topic for a Commencement matter.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I propose an amendment to the Order of Business that No. 96, motion 3, be taken before No. *a*1.

I am pleased we are moving forward with the reopening in recognition of the reality of the state of play with regard to Covid and I look forward to the full relaxing of restrictions as soon as possible. As much as we can enjoy ourselves now, we must not forget what still needs to be done, both in moving forward and in assessing what is now in our past. A full inquiry into the effectiveness, the necessity and the scope of each Government restriction put in place to combat Covid must be carried out and begun no later than this year.

The Covid certificate, which has been discontinued for domestic use, leaves behind it a mas-

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sive haul of personal data. The public needs to be told exactly what data is being held by the Government and how it is going to be held, processed or deleted in the near future. The same request must be made at the EU level. On the retirement of the certificate as a prerequisite for international travel, what will happen to the data in Brussels? We need certainty on this. I ask the Leader to ask the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, to come to the House to make a statement on the matter.

Not all to do with the pandemic response was an imposition. The move towards outdoor dining last summer brought with it great developments to the atmosphere in our towns and villages. As we come out of the winter months, I would like to see the regulations allowing restaurants and bars to continue to operate these outdoor spaces extended indefinitely. Many owners put a lot of money into these spaces, as did the Government, in order for them to be able to trade in accordance with the Government restrictions. The least we can do is allow these spaces to continue to exist into the summer and beyond. Perhaps we could ask the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, to update us on the extension of this provision.

In the same vein of helping hospitality, I am sure no one in this Chamber has been a stranger to passport requests over the past two years. Much of this arose from the closure of the Passport Office for a time over the course of the pandemic. I do not think that should have happened, given the essential nature of the service, but it did, and we are still working through the fallout.

I was contacted by a number of individuals who have been in the hospitality industry for years. They told me hoteliers are tearing out their hair over the delays in processing visas for skilled industry workers, particularly chefs. Backlogs have been experienced since last June regarding visa decisions for young chefs from outside the EU. It is causing real difficulty in the industry, an industry we should be doing all we can to help.

I ask the Leader to check with the Ministers to see what can be done in regard to these issues and perhaps ask each of them to come before the House to make a statement.

Senator Pippa Hackett: There is much optimism around at the moment. It is a new year and green shoots are already appearing, while the crisis of Covid is hopefully showing signs of disappearing. Behind the optimism, there still lurks another crisis which shows no sign of going anywhere, the climate and biodiversity one. We are all very aware of it but, understandably, we wonder what we can do about it. One thing I am asking everyone to do this year is to talk about and think about trees.

Trees matter. When it comes to climate, they sequester and store carbon and, apart from providing us with beautiful surroundings and amenities, in the right place they also provide a whole range of biodiversity, water and ecological benefits. They also, of course, take a long time to grow and leave quite a gap when they are felled, which is why the questions such as where, how, when and why trees are planted need to be answered.

One of my remits is to oversee the way in which we incentivise tree planting. Our forestry programme is the means through which we do this and a new one is due to come into place this time next year. Before it does, I want to make sure people get the opportunity to engage with all of the issues, become informed about trees and forestry and then give their opinion. The decisions we make this year will shape our woodlands and forests for generations to come. We have a much lower level of forestry cover than almost every other country in Europe and our level of native woodland is particularly low. How do we up it? How do we decide what is planted

where and by whom? That is why we need to talk about trees.

We started already with a behaviour and attitudes poll before Christmas. Its findings were encouraging in that it found that we, as a nation, value trees, we love to walk in woodlands and we want and like our mix of both conifers and broadleaves. I can certainly identify with that, living so close to the wonderful woodlands of Emo Court and Charleville Castle. However, the poll also showed that we have not really noticed much talk about trees in the media and we are much less aware than I would like of the benefits of timber for construction, something that cannot be ignored. This is why we need that conversation about trees, which continues this evening when I will engage with the group from An Foróige, a representation of the young people who will be most impacted by the decisions we make this year. This national conversation will continue with the citizens' assembly-style deliberative dialogue with 99 members of the general public, along with further online public engagement.

Two weeks ago, the chair of the Climate Change Advisory Council, Marie Donnelly, said that we are in a serious hole in terms of the afforestation rate in this country and that it is an immediate and urgent challenge to get the policies right so as to reverse that. She is right and I hope that this year, this national conversation on trees will play a big part in addressing that challenge.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: I also join colleagues in welcoming the easing of restrictions North and South over the past number of days, including in this House. I am sure that, like me, the Leader has missed seeing the school groups going around the building and members of men's sheds groups and other community organisations enjoying the tours and stopping and having a bit of craic in this House. It has been a real deficit for us all. I have missed bringing people into this House to engage with me in my role in the Seanad and hosting important and worthwhile campaign and lobby groups in the audiovisual room to give them an opportunity to engage with all Members of the Oireachtas. I am really looking forward to a time when we can do this as safely, compliantly and responsibly as possible.

In saying that, I also hope we do not forget the fundamental lessons we have learned over the course of this awful pandemic - the lessons of community and social solidarity and who front-line and emergency workers are when it comes to such a horrible crisis. We must learn the lessons of a lack of investment in healthcare provision and infrastructure across the State and redouble our efforts in this institution to address those deficiencies.

I also wish to discuss organ donation and the human tissue Bill, which the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, indicated at the end of last year would be a priority for him early this year. While it would do a lot of things, one of its core components would be to create a soft "opt-out" option for organ donation. Similar legislation is going through the assembly in the North. Given that organ donation operates on an all-Ireland basis in terms of the list through which people can hopefully obtain an organ, it is important that we harmonise that legislation and approach. In calling for that legislation to be brought forward under Government time, I respectfully ask people, because it is a personal issue, to consider becoming an organ donor if they are not already one and indicate to, and have a conversation with, their loved ones and those closest to them about their desires in this regard as quickly as possible.

This does not happen very often but I fully agree with Senator Ahearn about the issue of passports, an issue I have raised consistently. Like him, and, I am sure, many others, I have been inundated. It is going to be a bigger issue. The additional staff are welcome but we need

more staff and infrastructure. We cannot become passport offices or passport office workers. The workers there do fantastic work in meeting the needs of people but there is a clear and identifiable need for more and we need to ensure it is met.

Senator Annie Hoey: I raise the very pressing and worrying issue of Russia's plans to conduct a military exercise in waters off the Irish coast next month. The area is about 130 nautical miles off the coast of Cork and is firmly within Ireland's exclusive economic zone. We can all agree that there is grave concern in both military and political circles in Ireland. I will certainly not pretend to be a military expert on this but I note that the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, has told Russia that the exercise is not welcome. We can all agree, given the current escalating situation in the Ukraine, that the timing of these drills is possibly quite provocative. One has to wonder if these drills are part of Russia's mind games with NATO but, unfortunately, for us, it means we get dragged into the row also. It has also been pointed out that these drills will take place in an area with a lot of sub-sea infrastructure running along the southern coast and connecting Europe to North America, beneath the nexus of many of the Internet cables which connect these two continents. If there was to be any damage, accidental or otherwise, to these cables, it would cripple the economies of NATO countries and our economy.

Fishermen in Cork have expressed grave concerns at the environmental damage that would be caused to biodiversity and marine life in the area and have indicated their plans to peacefully protest against these drills. The chief executive officer of the Irish South and West Fish Producers Organisation, Mr. Patrick Murphy, has said there is currently 500 million tonnes of blue whiting in the area. Whatever munitions Russia plans on testing there, it will have a detrimental impact on the environment. Many of the warheads will likely contain depleted uranium. Any submarines involved will be using sonar, which can be devastating to larger marine life, particularly whales. We have a responsibility to protect the environment and larger marine life such as dolphins and whales. Seismic activity can have an impact for years. There is one example of a change in the migratory pattern of tuna, which is yet another example of human activity having a long-term impact on nature. War ships engaging in war games off our coast can and will have a devastating impact on the environment and marine life and has the potential to have a devastating and detrimental impact on our economic industry if things go wrong.

It is important we in the Upper House have an opportunity to ask the Minister for Defence what is being done. We need to have an opportunity to have a discussion and to raise concerns around these international affairs. This particular topic is very time sensitive.

I want to again mention the leaving certificate. Time is very much ticking on. There was a meeting of the advisory group and we were informed in a response to a Commencement matter earlier that there is a plan for yet another meeting. However, the time for a decision on this issue needs to be made very soon. It is unfair to string out the students, their families and teachers. We need to a decision fairly quick smart on this.

Senator Eileen Flynn: The Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, of which I am a member, has been dealing with reform of the leaving certificate. The committee has heard from many experts and civil society actors that the current leaving certificate system favours the well off and badly fails those who are marginalised. It inflicts trauma and stress on students without any real preparation for life after second level education. We should be rewarding children's learning abilities and not just their memories.

In 2016, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Ireland should reform the leaving certificate as it inflicts mental distress on young people. It is now 2022 and we have made no effort to change the system. The best interests of children should be the main priority. Young people are the main stakeholders.

Delayed reform means that more than 800,000 students will have gone through the leaving certificate system, some of whom will have fallen through the gaps, most likely not have progressed to third level education and will have experienced poverty, unemployment and homelessness due to a stressful, unequal system. I propose school-based assessments similar to the ones introduced by the Department of Education during the pandemic until the total leaving certificate system is reformed, as expected by 2030.

I have received many emails from students throughout the country stating that they want calculated grades this year. These young people need to be listened to. Their voices must be part of this conversation. Young people bring new light to this discussion. What we have now is not working for all our students. The leaving certificate, as it stands, is not an equal opportunity system. It needs to change and it is our job as legislators to change it.

I am also delighted to have the opportunity to work without lockdowns and restrictions in Leinster House and I look forward to welcoming young people from ethnic minority groups to their Parliament. I would also like to bring up the issue of young people getting work experience in Leinster House. As it stands now, young people between 16 and 18 are not allowed to get work experience here and that is something we also need to look at.

Senator Eugene Murphy: First, I want to welcome Senator Flynn back and congratulate her. I was not in the Chamber last week on her return.

Yesterday, County Roscommon and the Galway part of the Galway-Roscommon constituency welcomed the great announcement on active travel. A great many issues have been with us for years like the need to extend footpaths, walkways and cycleways, to take away dangerous bends and so forth. For the first time, we have seen a Government providing money to sort out such problems. I was in contact with a number of local authority members yesterday evening and I must say that the announcement got a great welcome. Of course, the fact that it is a roll-over fund is very important. The situation where local authorities are forced to spend money coming up to the end of the year or else send it back will not apply. This is a roll-over fund which is really important for some projects.

We also had school announcements from the Government recently. Six schools in my own county of Roscommon and the Galway part of the Galway-Roscommon constituency received very good news under the summer works scheme. On the subject of education, I have spoken to the Minister for Education about giving some sort of break to leaving certificate students this year and of course, the Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Niall Collins, was in the House earlier to respond to the Commencement matter raised by Senators Dolan and Carrigy. The news was positive and of course, the reopening is also positive news. It will be lovely to see a real buzz back in Leinster House, with the groups coming in and out from our constituencies and from different areas to meet us.

During a Commencement debate earlier today Senator Boyhan raised the issue of neurological nurses and the shortage thereof. This is an issue that I brought to the House before

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Christmas and at that stage we got good news in relation to University Hospital Galway to the effect that three or four neurological nurses will be appointed early in 2022, hopefully. There is a shortage of eight or nine in the hospital. I fully support what Senator Boyhan said earlier but I believe that the Minister for Health and the Government are committed to making more nurses available in that sector because many people are affected by neurological issues.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: It is great that we are in the Chamber and are able to have such very different conversations and consider such very different points. One of the announcements that I really welcome is the one on the right to request remote working that was made by the Tánaiste and more details were provided on that today. I have heard various debates and interviews over the course of the day on the issue and am aware of the concerns of both employees and employers. Issues like health and safety, access to broadband and related matters that are a concern for both employers and employees can be addressed by the Connected Hubs initiative launched by the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys. I took the opportunity today to explore that initiative further through the website *connectedhubs.ie* and found, to my surprise, that there are two hubs in Dublin 8. Even in my home constituency of Dublin South-Central there already are desk space and meeting room options available. There are 177 hubs up and running already and by the end of this year, there will be 400. As we move on and go back to being an open society, we can live our lives in a newly envisioned way and have many opportunities to do so. I really welcome the hubs and draw Members' attention to *connectedhubs.ie*, which is a fantastic resource. The hubs are all over the country and they enable people to consider different spaces in the context of working from home.

4 o'clock

If there are worries about not having a suitable, safe space within a house, it is important that we start looking creatively at how to address employers' concerns. It is a good resource to go onto for employees wanting to do that.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I second the amendment to the Order of Business proposed by Senator Keogan.

I was delighted to hear that Rescue 117 in Waterford has been saved. We now have four SAR bases in the country that are guaranteed by the Government. That is welcome and I thank all the Members of this House and the Lower House who got behind that campaign to ensure that we kept four helicopters. I have asked on a number of occasions for the business case for this to be released. This is part of the reason we asked for the debate in this House. The Air Corps was assessed as providing one base in the country. In order to provide that base, it was expected to have three helicopters rather than five for four bases, to be available 100% of the time rather than 95% of the time and to fund spare parts at a premium of 60% above that which would be charged to a commercial supplier. I can see no reason why the Irish Air Corps would not provide the fixed-wing element, but it looks like we are going to have a fixed-wing element provided from the UK. That aircraft will be flying across Ireland with sophisticated surveillance technology on board. None of this makes sense. In agreeing to have four helicopters for SAR or four helicopter bases, we have altered the business case that was put together to form the pre-qualification questionnaire in the first place. In addition, they added on the fire-fighting equipment after the business case was put together. Everything about this is shambolic. It seems to be a case of making it up as we go along. It is vitally important that the business case is published and that we have an open debate in this House. It is not the Minister or any politician that is making these decisions. Sadly, politicians are losing the plot when it comes to civil

servants taking major decisions. The cost over ten years is €1 billion. We need this opened up to debate.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I welcome the approval by Government for the development at O'Devaney Gardens. For more than a decade, the site at O'Devaney Gardens has been plagued by political and planning arguments. For all of that time there has been nothing but dereliction and antisocial behaviour on that site. Today's announcement means that in the next quarter of this year, not in ten or 20 years' time, construction will commence in respect of more than 1,000 A-rated social, affordable and private homes, a community crèche, a community centre, shops, and a playground. Most importantly, there is an apprenticeship and local employment clause in the contract. This is a really good day for the area. The building of more than 1,000 homes means that thousands of people who are on the housing list, those who are unable to afford their rents and those who are unable to afford to buy will now have the opportunity to do all three in Dublin city.

The second issue I wish to raise relates to how we educate our children. This House is the ideal place to debate this issue. Specifically, I refer to the organisation of the education of our children in same-sex schools. It is beyond time that we debated this issue. We need to look at how we organise ourselves as a society. When we are born into this world, we are all born equal and we do not have the barriers or the taboos of being male or female. We talk a good deal about wanting to equal things out, equal things up and have women earn the same money and be treated as equals. We are the ones creating the barriers for children at a very early age. When we send boys and girls to segregated schools, we tell them they are different. We do not do this in crèches and we do it to increasingly less in primary schools and new schools that are being built. We need to look at our secondary schools. We need to look at what that to which I refer is instilling in our society. I would like the Leader to arrange a debate on the matter.

Senator Emer Currie: I welcome the new legislation on the right to request remote working and I look forward to the pre-legislative scrutiny of it. Let us be clear. This legislation alone will not revolutionise the way we work. It is part of a bigger national remote working strategy that recognises the economic driver that remote working can be for places that do not have red ribbon job announcement moments and it can also invest in communities, community infrastructure and hubs.

We are helping communities transition, but we need to help employers transition as well. There is more research now emerging where employers are not as in love with remote working as they have been over the past two years, whereas employees are still as in love with remote working. We have to help them through that transition. We do it through skills, by training them, by talking in this Chamber about remote-first, remote only and best practice hybrid companies. We can do it through talking about companies such as HubSpot, Flipdish, GitLab, Dropbox and Shopify, which are not normally part of the employers that we talk about, as well as the Grow Remote alliance of top CEOs who are committed to leading the transition. We need to implement their learnings.

Employers need to provide credible and demonstrable reasons they would refuse remote working. Nobody wants a box-ticking exercise that enables them to refuse requests without an effective challenge and consideration. Many employers have already shown much goodwill. Many employees have already demonstrated that their productivity is just as good, if not more. Therefore, we should be building on that goodwill and that trust.

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The double tax needs to be sorted out for residents of the South who work in the North and will not be able to work from home unless the waiver is extended. This brings our attention to the bigger issue of flexibility for all. There is legislation that will be coming forward from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth for parents and carers. However, we know that my view is that flexibility should be available to everybody.

Senator Paul Gavan: This morning, there were 97 patients in the University Hospital Limerick, UHL, on trolleys. This is the highest number of patients without a bed recorded in any Irish hospital ever. I cannot tell you how many times I have raised this issue over the past six years and yet things continue to go from bad to worse. Indeed, in November, I predicted that hospital would hit 100 patients on trolleys this winter and this morning it was just three away from that.

I joined with the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, in calling for an urgent investigation into this long-standing and ever-worsening overcrowding by the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, and I invite the leaders to join the INMO in making that call. We cannot keep on going like this. The staff, patients and wider Limerick community need to see a plan to resolve these long-standing issues. The fact of the matter is there has been an abject failure by successive Governments to deal with this crisis.

We are promised a new 96-bed unit late next year, but half of those beds will be replacing existing ones that are being phased out. Therefore, we will be getting just 48 new beds. The problem is that according to hospital management, today we are 200 beds short. The people in Limerick and the mid-west will have to wait the best part of another two years before these beds open. Even then, there will still be a deficit of 150 beds. I ask the Leader, respectfully, what the people of Limerick are supposed to do in the meantime.

Recent research from the UK indicates there is one excess death for every 67 patients who stay in the emergency department for eight to 12 hours. This begs the question of how many lives are being lost each week because of the ongoing crisis in UHL. This crisis did not happen by accident; it was predicted a decade ago by health workers and trade unions. However, 11 years on, this Government is floundering.

I am asking for a dedicated debate on UHL. We have gone on for more than a decade. It has gotten worse year on year. We need to take action. I call on all of us, on a cross-party basis, to address this issue.

Senator Gerry Horkan: Like every Senator - I have been listening to debates from my office before I came into the Chamber - I want to welcome the restrictions being removed as much as they were. It probably caught everybody a little by surprise, but it was very positive. There was a great mood around all of our towns, villages and cities in the past couple of days. We will remember those we have lost and those who suffered significantly in terms of illness and their businesses being impacted. I support the calls by other Senators that we support all of those businesses that were really badly affected during the pandemic, including the restaurants, pubs, play facilities and the arts, entertainment and tourism industries generally.

Similar to Senator Currie, I think that some small benefits have arisen out of the Covid-19 pandemic, including the move from cash to card payments, which was happening anyway but which happened much more quickly. All of a sudden, we realised that things we never thought we would be able to do remotely we were able to do. There are thousands of people no longer

getting into their cars at 7 a.m. to travel to the office for 9 a.m., while others who live in particular locations and do not have access to good public transport are no longer stressed about having to get up early in order to get somewhere in order to access public transport.

We need to have a proper debate. Many employers appreciate the benefits they are getting from their employees and the employees realise that their work-life balance is better. Employees are more productive, they have a better work-life balance and they are able to look after their children in a different way than they were doing before the pandemic. We need a debate so that we might ensure that all of those benefits are acknowledged and that employers appreciate that in order to retain talent, they need to keep employees happy.

I welcome the reopening of this House. Some Senators were never in this House prior to the introduction of Covid-19 restrictions. I hope they enjoy the easing of restrictions here and that we can soon invite former Members and councillors to visit to the House again. This is the people's House. The sooner those restrictions can be lifted, the better.

Senator Tim Lombard: I would like to comment on an issue that has been raised by several Senators, namely, the proposed Russian exercises in the waters off the coast of County Cork in the coming weeks. I spoke to several fishermen this morning. I also spoke with Patrick Murphy, the chief executive officer of the Irish South and West Fish Producers Organisation Limited. They are deeply concerned about this proposal. It is nonsensical in so many ways. From an environmental point of view, to have this so-called testing of arms happening off our coast makes no sense. It is within our economic zone.

In my part of the world, fishing is a really important to the economy. Fishermen work exceptionally hard. That the biodiversity and fishing stocks could be disrupted, if not destroyed, by these exercises is unbelievable. We need to have a real debate in the Seanad on this issue. We should ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, to come to the House to update Senators on his views on this matter and on what he proposes to do to stop these exercises. The proposal from the Irish South and West Fish Producers Organisation that fishing boats go out there is very dangerous. I would be deeply concerned for my fishing community that they could become embroiled in an international incident off the south-west coast of Cork. We need to make sure that these waters are safe. To permit such exercises at this stage is beyond belief. Our neutrality has been a really important part of our history. To have these so-called exercises happening makes no sense. The Irish South and West Fish Producers Organisation has offered me a place on one of the vessels going out to there, which I will probably decline. It is important that we support the fishing industry. Following on from Brexit, up to 60 ships will be dismantled in the next few years. What is left of fish stocks will be disrupted by these testing exercises. This is a significant issue that we need to address.

Senator Erin McGreehan: I want to request a debate on special needs assistants, SNAs, within our schools. The Leader will be aware that there are approximately 18,000 SNAs working within our school communities and looking after our children. I would like a debate primarily on the Department's plans for the future of SNAs within our schools and on how we go about looking after them and protecting their contracts. It is also about protecting them as really valuable people and as being different but equal to the teachers in their own schools. We must remember the inclusion we speak about, in that we cherish having children with additional needs in our mainstream schools, is only permitted and facilitated by having SNAs within our schools. The schools we want and the communities we want are facilitated by these great workers. They deserve to be recognised as a profession in themselves. It is sad to think we have

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nearly 18,000 people who do not have a proper contract and who wonder every year if they are going to have employment in the following year. That has its own knock-on effects, such as on getting a loan or a mortgage and all those things you have in normal life. It is predominantly women who work in this role, as all Members know. That is another example of how gendered roles in our countries have been neglected, seen as a part-time gig or just a bit of pocket money for a woman. That is not correct; this is a profession. It is really valuable and an integral part of the community and country we want to have in future, one that is truly inclusive.

I highlight also the fact that SNAs are put on a course in UCD and they have not been accredited. It is a year-long course with no transferable qualifications if they go to another country. It is a 12-month course that is not recognised on any of the scales for qualifications. That is atrocious.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I raise the plight of the leaving certificate class of 2022. It is an issue on which the Leader herself and many others in the Chamber have spoken as well. We all know the leaving certificate period is an extremely stressful time for both the pupils themselves and their parents and indeed the entire household of a pupil going through the process. That stress is now compounded by what the leaving certificate class of 2022 has gone through with the additional stresses Covid has brought along. I have received many telephone calls from students and parents in recent weeks who are calling for finality and for a decision to be made sooner rather than later on this issue. For anyone to suggest this leaving certificate class should be treated differently to those of the preceding two years is grossly unfair. This year's class have been impacted as much as the classes of 2021 and 2020. I compliment the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and all the stakeholders including parents, students and the Department on the work they have done in the last number of years to come up with a model whereby predicted grades were able to satisfy the vast majority. It is impossible to satisfy everyone with these things. I appreciate this is difficult and talks are ongoing on this issue. I ask that a final push be made on behalf of the students of the leaving certificate class of 2022 so they too can get a fair crack of the whip, so to speak, and that some form of predicted grades could be adopted to facilitate them. That decision would remove some of the stress they are currently experiencing.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I wish to raise the better energy warmer homes scheme that delivers a range of energy-efficient measures free of charge to low-income households vulnerable to energy poverty. The scheme is funded by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI. By March 2021 over 142,000 homes have received free upgrades, leaving their occupants better able to afford to heat them. The scheme provides support for attic, internal and external wall insulation, draughtproofing, window replacement etc. where occupants are in receipt of carer's allowance, domiciliary care allowance and fuel allowance. This includes a high number of elderly people.

However, on behalf of a colleague of mine, Councillor John Paul O'Shea of Cork County Council, I note that on the application for completion of works nationally, the waiting time is now 26 months. That is not 26 weeks but 26 months. In my own county, 56 homeowners are currently awaiting works through the scheme with an average wait time for contractors of 22 months. These figures are shocking. By their nature, the people applying for these schemes are the most vulnerable. Therefore, the application process and completion times need to be condensed. The Government has allocated extra funds for the retrofitting scheme from the carbon tax. I ask the Leader to ask the Minister to examine these measures, speed up the assessments and make sure the jobs are completed in a shorter time.

I wish to raise another issue on which I have spoken a number of times and bring it to the attention of the Leader. I refer to funding for autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes. We welcome the funding when it is made available, but I take issue with the term “ASD”. The reality is that autism is not a disorder but just a different personality. I would like the term to be changed. I have written to the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, about it. I would like the term to be removed from the language all of us use. We welcome funding when it is announced by the Government because it is needed, and more will be needed. However, autism is not a disorder; it is a different personality.

Senator Joe O’Reilly: Many colleagues will have seen the harrowing “Prime Time” report on the tragic death of Eden Heaslip, who was a victim of extreme bullying. I acknowledge that Senator Keoghan and, subsequently, Senator McGahon have raised this matter with the Leader and she responded, but I wish to bring it up again.

A real hero of the “Prime Time” report was Fr. Jason Murphy, a confidant and counsellor of Eden. He similarly featured in “Operation Transformation” a few nights later. It more than merits mention here that in recent years priests and religious have suffered collectively for the inexcusable criminality of a tiny minority. Most priests and religious, like Fr. Jason Murphy, work daily to bring comfort, solace and practical assistance to vulnerable people. It is only right that in this House of the national Parliament that such unsung, quiet, daily work would receive acknowledgement, in light of what priests and religious have gone through in recent years, and especially in the light of Fr. Murphy’s work, which shone out that night. Raymond, Margaret and the family shone out too. What is extraordinary about the family is that rather than being bitter and cynical - it would be excusable if they were both - they have set about a life of helping to prevent the bullying of others and eliminate bullying in schools. They have said, “Let us be buddies, not bullies”. They have a campaign going in that regard, which is admirable. I call on the Leader to support me in the view that our unsung heroes of priests and religious across the country, like Fr. Murphy, who work daily, are saluted here in this Chamber.

Senator Sharon Keogan: Hear, hear.

Senator Joe O’Reilly: They should not be victims of bad publicity because of the actions of a few.

Senator Martin Conway: Hear, hear.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I acknowledge the funding announced yesterday for active travel. The fund is €184 million, which is nearly €200 million that has been allocated this year to local authorities. Some €11 million has been allocated to Galway and Roscommon for walking and cycling routes. Some might say that is grand, but in many rural towns there are no footpaths. It is dangerous to go out walking in the evenings or any time of the day on a busy country road. It is important that we are seeing this type of development and it is brilliant that it is having such an impact in rural areas as well. As I mentioned, there are projects for walking schemes, footpaths and the cycle way will come in to the west as well. I hope that will make a huge impact.

An amount of €4 million was also allocated for the summer works scheme for many schools in rural areas. Such funding is used to provide improvements to windows and ventilation for children in schools and for roof works and external areas, in other words, playgrounds. Schools are trying to encourage more use of outdoor areas. Safe routes to schools was another thing being funded as part of active travel. Having safe drop-off and pick-up areas where cars are able

to stop outside of schools is a big issue in rural areas.

Senator Martin Conway: Some 97 people are on trolleys in the University Hospital Limerick emergency department today. It is a disgrace. It is indefensible and a poor reflection on us as a society. It is an indictment of our health service and our Government. In spite of tens of millions of euro being spent building modular units and additional accommodation, there is a situation in Limerick where there are more people from the mid-west on trolleys than anywhere else in the country. I want to know why. Is it a lack of funding, resources, available nurses, beds or Covid? Is it due to a difficulty with management or is it down to incompetence? The people of the mid-west deserve answers at this stage. The only way to find out why 97 of our citizens are sitting on trolleys in Limerick today is if there is an independent inquiry that does not involve people from the UL hospital group or its management. It is not good enough. I am blue in the face standing up here year after year, month after month, highlighting this. The people of Limerick, Clare, Tipperary and the mid-west deserve better from this Government and our health service. I want answers and the only way to get those is an independent inquiry. It could be HIQA or an outside agency, but it must be independent because we need answers. It is not good enough, it is indefensible, it is not acceptable and it cannot continue.

Senator Paul Gavan: Well said.

Senator Maria Byrne: I wish to support Senator Conway's call for an independent review into University Hospital Limerick. I raise the matter every second week and have done so for the last year. The problem is ongoing and it is not good enough.

Yesterday was international day of education. The Minister, Deputy Harris, was in Limerick yesterday. I had the pleasure of visiting some schools with him. He spoke about CAO offers and the choices to be made. We had good engagement with the students in St. Mary's secondary school and Coláiste Mhichíl CBS secondary school. They are both DEIS schools. The students were delighted to have engagement with the Minister and to be able to discuss their upcoming leaving certificate, college places and what they are thinking about doing. I was interested by the number of people who were interested in apprenticeships, which now appear on the CAO form and which did not before. It is also on the website. This is really encouraging. Since the previous year, there have been some 1,500 extra applications for apprenticeships. It is really encouraging. While a degree course suits some, it does not suit all. It should be highlighted and people who are interested in apprenticeships should be encouraged. It is a form of education.

Senator McGreehan raised the course SNAs are encouraged to take yet their qualification is not recognised in their pay and it is not accredited. Something has to happen. Education is the order of the day but it needs to be looked at. I would like the Leader's support.

Senator John Cummins: Last week on the Order of Business I raised local concerns about Rescue 117 and its base at Waterford airport. I said that I did not share the down-beat concerns while understanding the pressing need for clarity. I welcome that clarity and today's Cabinet decision that the four existing bases of Waterford, Sligo, Shannon and Dublin will be specified in the new tender document. I have been raising this matter with the Tánaiste for several months, as I am sure the Leader has been doing with regard to the Dublin base. It is a matter of the utmost importance. Everyone in this Chamber is in awe at the dedication and bravery displayed by the crews of all our search and rescue services on a daily basis.

I also raise the issue of the N24, to which Senator Ahearn also referred. It is the primary

connection between the mid-west and the south east, which is of particular importance in the context of Brexit and the onward connections through Rosslare Port. The decision was made just before Christmas to pause funding for this year for the Cahir to Waterford section of that road. That decision needs to be reversed and I ask for a debate with the Minister for Transport on it. Six or seven roads have not been allocated funding for 2022. Some €1.5 million would allow that project to continue through the planning and route selection stages. This has to happen because in order for us as a State to be ready to spend the envelope of more than €5 billion on roads post 2024, we have to have the projects ready to go. It would be prudent of the Government to allocate that small sum of €1.5 million and to change the decision.

Senator Niall Blaney: Given the week we are in, I wish to raise the 50th anniversary of the Bloody Sunday events this year. It is ironic that the 50th anniversary falls on a Sunday. The Bloody Sunday Trust in Derry has duly titled its work One World-One Struggle and has organised events from this Thursday, 27 January, until Sunday, 30 January. I ask people to engage with those events over that four-day period. A play titled *The White Handkerchief* will take place at 4 p.m., the time of the shootings 50 years ago in 1972. I saw some very good interviews during the week, including one with Denis Bradley, a great man who was there on the day. I ask for the support of the House in offering our support to the committees and organisations in the efforts they are making to get truth and justice about all that happened, the cold-blooded murder and shootings that took place on behalf of the British Government by British armed forces.

We should also offer our support in opposing the amnesty proposed by the British Government. In light of this, and in light of the discussions on the amnesty, I ask that we have a debate in the House and invite the Minister for Foreign Affairs to have a discussion around the Bloody Sunday events and other legacy issues in dealing with the past. It is a very sore point when it comes to dealing with Northern Ireland and what took place over those decades of struggle. It would be timely to have a debate on it.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator for raising that important issue. At the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight today we will be discussing the matter of having a minute's silence tomorrow for the victims of Bloody Sunday.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Before the break, Senator Chambers spoke about hunger in Afghanistan and the very severe food crisis there at the moment. Yemen, as we know, is also experiencing a very serious famine. Perhaps a debate on food security and famine would be appropriate.

An issue that has arisen over the course of the Order of Business relates to the proposed military activities within the 200 nautical miles of Ireland's exclusive economic zone, EEZ. There has been much focus on the Irish Aviation Authority and the information it has sought and received but the key issue relates to the marine information, particularly that which relates to sonar and noise levels. That information is relevant because Ireland has responsibilities under the habitats directive and Natura 2000. The EU law is clear that environmental responsibilities extend throughout a country's EEZ.

Given that is Ireland's responsibility as part of EU law, it would be appropriate for the Government and others to regulate sonar and noise activities in that area and, as well as using those instruments of regulation and taking account of that primary law, to ensure we monitor, seek and require relevant environmental information on sonar. That is important particularly for the habitats of cetaceans, given that in the past, links have been drawn between naval and military

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exercises and the mass stranding of whales and dolphins. Ireland, as a neutral country, has always been strong on international law being the way in which we engage constructively. This environmental law is an appropriate instrument through which we can engage, and we can then partner with appropriate civilian or scientific partners. Those are areas we might want to consider and that might be useful. Perhaps if we have debates in these areas, those issues should be part of that, as well as being instruments we can begin to use now.

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

Senator Regina Doherty: To respond to Senator Higgins, a number of requests for debates were made last week and this week and some have been carried over from before Christmas. I will put together a list and send it to the relevant Ministers to remind them of the requests that have been made. I will add requests for debates on Yemen but also on Afghanistan. It is important we have a debate on events there, not just because of the serious famine conditions the population is living under but also because of the damage being done before our eyes to the female population.

On Senator Blaney's point, it is important that we have a debate on the amnesty he mentioned, an issue other Senators have raised previously. I will make that request as a matter of priority, and I am happy to support the Cathaoirleach's call at the meeting of the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight, CPP, this evening that we would hold a minute's reflection tomorrow, on the 50th anniversary. It is appropriate that the Senator brought to our attention the events being held from Thursday to Sunday and asked people to support them, so I thank him for that.

Senators Cummins and Ahearn spoke about the absences from the review of the national development plan that was announced before Christmas. I made a request last week to the Minister for Transport to appear before the House for a debate on the plans. To be optimistic about it, perhaps the backloading of the money from that Minister's Department is a reason for the absence of the roads from the list that was published before Christmas. As soon as that debate has been scheduled, I will let both Senators know, although I am sure it is of interest to many other people throughout the country. Senator Carrigy's area also has an important road to talk about.

This is not the first time the issue raised by Senators Maria Byrne, Conway and Gavan today has been raised. I say this advisedly so as not to get myself or anybody else into trouble. It arises in the House almost every other week, and it is surprising nobody else is talking about the same issues in their local hospitals to the same extent as the three Senators. If it is not arising in Beaumont Hospital, the Mater hospital, Letterkenny University Hospital or wherever, there is a reason for that, although we do not know what that reason is. As Senators Gavan and Conway said, there have been announcements of spending commitments at the hospital in recent years. It is not that the State is not putting the money there but that it seems to be just gobbled up, and as soon as new beds are provided, they seem to be gobbled up too and the problem seems to return. Not only do I concur that a debate is needed but we need a wider examination of the exact problems. On behalf of the three Senators, I will write to the Minister for Health today, conveying their serious concerns on behalf of everyone in that part of the country and will revert to them.

I wish to acknowledge the contribution on apprenticeships that was made by Senator Maria Byrne. For far too long in this country and somewhere after the 1980s, and maybe when the Celtic tiger came in the 1990s, we all got a little above ourselves thinking that we all had to

be brain surgeons or stockbrokers. The traditional professions that had been the backstop of hardworking, decent people in this country were suddenly uncool and yet we find ourselves at the moment with not enough bricklayers, carpenters, electricians and mechanics because they all left or did not train. So it is certainly welcome that young people are looking at those professions again.

I saw an article the other day on how people pick their careers and research shows that people with a higher intelligence quotient, IQ, are usually employed by people with not as high an IQ. Moreover, we have far more entrepreneurs in the sectors that have been mentioned concerning apprenticeships than we have in any other part of Irish society. It is welcome that we have got back to our roots and basics.

Senator Dolan spoke about the welcome announcement by the Minister for Transport yesterday on active travel. Sometimes when these announcements are made, people say that we always talk about greenways or cycling but the bread and butter of yesterday's announcement is to fix the pathways in housing estates that are 20 and 30 years old, which are uneven because of trees growing. It is the real, normal bread and butter stuff that county councillors work on day in, and day out, and lots of us here were county councillors. It is not just about the wonderful advantages that we are going to have from a tourism perspective or even the exercise and health perspectives because of the greenways, walkways and blueways but is also just about the normal common or garden problems that we have in all of our villages and that are going to be solved by this money, which is great.

I wish to say to Senator Joe O'Reilly that I was struck by Fr. Murphy last week because of the hurt and the pain that young Eden's passing caused him. He really did reach out and not just to the family and the wider community. I refer to how touched Fr. Murphy was interacting with that young man and the devastation caused by the passing of Eden's life. The Senator is right, and Senator Keogan has mentioned it here before, that people are very quick to stand up and give out about religious staff and sometimes that is deserved but not always, and certainly not everybody. It is very few and seldom that we see people laud the work that they do in communities. I know for sure from my own parish, and the priests who were in our parishes but who have gone to different parishes, and Senator Keogan will probably know who I am talking about, they are wonderful men who support communities and they certainly do not get the praise they deserve. I thank Senator Joe O'Reilly for bringing up this matter.

Senator Carrigy talked about the warmer homes scheme and the fact that we need to examine measures to speed them up. I will write a little note to the Minister this afternoon to ask him to come back to us with the plans for the short and medium term. I take on board the use of language that he raised here this morning. The language that we use is very important but it is something that has become accepted now but it should not be and should be challenged. I thank the Senator for bringing the issue up this morning.

Senator Gallagher and others talked about the leaving certificate today. I nearly feel sick listening to myself talk about it but that is probably because I have a young man at home who is studying and he will not let me forget about it. My son constantly quotes to me what Deputy Barry says every single day because he is so impressed by him.

It is wonderful that 17 and 18-year-olds in the last couple of weeks have become politically attuned to what it is that we do because they are interested in the decisions that we are going to make, as they have a direct impact on them. We read, periodically, how political parties are

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going to engage young people. When one talks about what is important to them then they get engaged and that has really been shown in the last couple of weeks. What is crucial this week is that we show that we have listened to young people and have heard what they have had to say. I hope that the Minister and, indeed, the steering group really do understand the effects that stress due to Covid has had on them in the last number of years. While we all welcome the fact that today we are going back to whatever the new normal is, their normal has not been anywhere near normal for the past 24 months and we need to take that into account.

Senator McGreehan sought a debate on the future of SNAs. At the moment the unions have a campaign on respect for SNAs. We have spoken about this issue here before and it is something in which we should engage. The 18,000 people who look after the care needs of children in school, and do it so well, should be applauded and supported, so I would agree with that.

Senators Lombard and Hoey spoke about the Russian interactions and intentions over the next couple of weeks. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, is obviously far more diplomatic than I would be when he described these things as unwelcome and unwarranted. I think that there is something incredibly sinister and menacing about the actions. We all know that this is far more than training with live missiles off the coast of a neutral country that does not have the monitoring capabilities. Whether it is from a sonar perspective, as Senator Higgins has spoken about, from an ecological perspective or to pick up the tab for the damage it will potentially do, we all know something sinister is going on. It is far from innocuous training that was going on. I will leave it the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and his far better diplomatic skills to deal with it and to ensure we have the support of the European Union. To that end, this morning I asked for a debate, because it is timely, and I have no doubt that they will not pull out between now and next week. As soon as I have a date for that I will organise it in the schedule for next week.

Senator Horkan asked for a debate on remote working. There will be one because the heads of the Bill that were passed by Cabinet this morning will go to the committee for pre-legislative scrutiny but it is probably important that we have a debate here to highlight all the good measures we have seen over the last two years and to weed out some of the harsh practices employers sometimes use. We should make sure we see them coming before they sneak up. I will organise that in the coming weeks.

Senator Currie has been speaking about remote working for years, long before it became cool during Covid. It has accelerated people's acceptance of it and their appreciation of the fact that the two hours most people spend commuting every day do not need to be so spent. The appreciation of being able to spend more time with our families is lovely. One thing that was nice about the last two years was that participation in the workforce by women, or returnees as we call them, has increased by 3%. That is massive and it is to be welcomed and worked upon.

Senator Fitzpatrick talked about O'Devaney Gardens and the welcome news that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage got the go-ahead from Cabinet this morning to proceed with those 1,000 plus homes that are so badly needed in that area.

I am sorry to say this to Senator Craughwell and I hope he understands but I cannot accept his amendment to the Order of Business only because I cannot get anybody today. In the time since he raised the issue – and Senator Keogan first proposed it - I have secured a debate for next Wednesday on the search and rescue tender. I have also instructed that without having the business case in our hands before the debate then the debate is fruitless. To that end, I have also

extended the time for the navigation Bill in order to get the Minister here for the afternoon. I ask the Senator to accept that I will have that debate next Wednesday but not without the business case, which has been altered on the basis of the announcement that was made for the Cabinet this morning. We all need to see it and I am surprised that the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications has not received it yet, given that it had requested it. I hope that suffices and that we will have the debate next week.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the Leader.

Senator Regina Doherty: The Senator is dead right. If nothing else he has the passion to keep bringing something he cares about to this House and to everybody's attention every week. I have no doubt, whether he is right or wrong, that his bona fides will be appreciated by the end of this.

Senator Seery Kearney talked about the massive increases in remote working hubs she will see in Dublin 8, which is welcome. Again that forms part of the requirement for a debate on remote working. Senator Murphy talked about the active travel money announcements yesterday. He also talked about the paths and dangerous bends on our roads. These are the bread and butter issues that we know mean so much to the people in our communities so I thank him for bringing that up.

I was not here last week to welcome Senator Flynn back and I know she is not in the Chamber at the moment but like Senator Murphy I would like to welcome her back. She is a massive addition to this Chamber. We have probably been talking about leaving certificate reform since I did my leaving certificate and that is not today or yesterday. It was appropriate and it stuck in my mind when she said the end of our school days should be about rewarding learning abilities and not just rewarding people who have good memories. Unfortunately that is the way our leaving certificate model is established.

The CAO points and the fact that there are only ten places for 25 people even though we need 30 nurses are bizarre and bonkers. The last couple of years have forced our teachers' unions and the entire school community to do something they would have never done in a million years if we did not have to and if we did not have Covid. It is a difficult task and I do not envy the Minister for Education because it is a difficult job. Where there are people and negotiations there is always difficulty but we have shown that we can do it and that we can do it fairly. There is grade inflation and that is the downside to it but we must increase the number of places we have on offer. We acknowledge that if we had 1,000 new nurses tomorrow the HSE would be able to employ them and yet we only train 400 or 500 every year. It makes no sense. Let us find the places because we need the resources of the young men and women who want to be in those professions. I welcome Senator Flynn back and thank her for her contribution.

Senator Hoey talked about the Russians and I will organise a debate on that issue. Senator Ó Donnghaile spoke about welcoming Dáil tours back, whether it is active age groups, school tours or Tidy Towns organisations. It really will be lovely to see this place buzzing again the way it used to be over the last four years. As the Senator said, a number of people who have been elected to both the Dáil and Seanad in the last couple of years have never experienced this place when it is at full tilt so it will be really welcome.

Senator Keogan asked about bringing the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, into the House to make a statement about Covid certificates. She is absolutely right. I will contact his

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office this afternoon to try to arrange a date and come back to the Senator. She is right, however. Some of the things that have happened in the last number of years such as outdoor dining would never have been accepted in the psyche of Irish people. We have always been these cold creatures who would sit outside and freeze. The reality has been entirely different. People have genuinely enjoyed the pedestrianisation and friendly family atmosphere that became evident in their towns and villages, and long may it last. Whatever extensions to legislation or by-laws that need to be done should be done. I will certainly bring it up with the Minister of State.

The Minister of State, Senator Hackett, talked about green shoots and her plans and ambitions for tree planting in this country which, again, is very welcome. When somebody is talking about something they love, the passion just exudes from them and comes naturally, which is great.

Senator Ahearn spoke about passports with equal passion. Again, we talk about the bread and butter issues that people bring to us. It was an unprecedented disaster last year and given what we know about the pent-up backlog, I am not even sure that 300 staff will be enough. It is welcome but as the Senator said, we absolutely need to see them now. We need to see them immediately. We need to see accelerated processes because the priority passports are no longer priorities. People who apply online get them within two or three days while the priorities are waiting weeks. As Members will know, a person cannot do his or her first application online when it comes to new children, plenty of whom have not been outside of the country in the last few years. I will certainly bring the request for statements to the Minister as a priority.

Senator Malcolm Byrne opened today by encouraging those people who can afford to do so to go out and look after the people who have been absolutely crippled for the last couple of years, whether it is going to Copper Face Jacks, a local burger joint or even just out for a pint - a real pint of Guinness as opposed to a home-made one. It is something we should all do to genuinely enjoy the company and sociability we have missed so much for the last 24 months. There is an awful lot to be catching up on. On a more serious note, the Senator talked about the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill and the need for the Minister to come back with reassurances that he and his committee colleagues made. I will certainly send that note to the Minister today and hopefully be able to come back to the Senator as soon as I can.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Is the Leader inviting us all to Coppers?

Senator Aisling Dolan: It was just Senator Byrne.

An Cathaoirleach: That is a matter for the Leader. I do not know if anyone has the Copper Face Jacks gold card but if they do, they should please share.

Senator Keogan has moved an amendment to the Order of Business: "That No. 96, motion 3, be taken before No. *a1*." Is the amendment being pressed?

Senator Sharon Keogan: I would like to withdraw the amendment.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Order of Business agreed to.

Report of the Committee of Selection: Motion

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I move:

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

Question put and agreed to.

**Fisheries (Commercial Fishing Licences) (Alteration of Duties and Fees) Order 2022:
Motion**

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

That the proposal that Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Fisheries (Commercial Fishing Licences) (Alteration of Duties and Fees) Order 2022,

copies of which were laid before Seanad Éireann on 17th January, 2022, be referred to the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action, in accordance with Standing Order 71(2)(b), which, not later than 8th February, 2022, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 75, and Standing Order 77(2) shall accordingly apply.”

Question put and agreed to.

Message from Joint Committee

An Cathaoirleach: The Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science at its meeting today has completed its consideration of the Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2022.

Sitting suspended at 4.54 p.m. and resumed at 5 p.m.

Climate and Agriculture: Statements

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): I welcome the Minister and he has ten minutes in which to make an opening statement.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am delighted to be here today in the Seanad to speak about the climate challenge from an agricul-

ture perspective.

While the Covid-19 pandemic lingers in Ireland and around the world, we cannot lose sight of other challenges. The climate challenge is certainly one that remains in firm focus both for me personally and for this Government.

The agrifood sector is Ireland's most important indigenous industry. It plays a vital role in Ireland's economy and the fabric of rural communities and societies. It is the bedrock of every rural village in Ireland. Our agrifood sector is dominated by livestock. We have 80% of our agricultural area under permanent grassland, which underpins our world famous grass based production system, producing beef and dairy products that are exported to 180 countries all over the world. The sector accounts for 8% of all employment and 10% of all exports that leave Ireland are agrifood based. The sector is a significant driver of economic activity in rural Ireland.

The sustainability of Ireland's food production system is well recognised internationally and acts as a key competitive driver in international markets for Irish food producers. Nevertheless, there are challenges ahead for food production systems globally. No more so than in Ireland where 37% of all national greenhouse gas emissions come from the agrifood sector, which accounts for a total of approximately 21.4 MT CO₂ equivalents in the most recent full-year inventory by the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, in 2020.

While farmers have delivered much by way of efficiency gains in recent years, it must be recognised that some environmental metrics have deteriorated on the back of recent dairy expansion. It was in this context that I published AgClimatise, which is our climate and air roadmap out to 2030, in late 2019. This was followed up last summer with the publication of Food Vision 2030.

Food Vision is a landmark for the Irish agrifood sector with the potential to transform agriculture, food, forestry and marine in the period to 2030 and has sustainability at its core. Food Vision is a strategy for the sector that was produced by the sector, and is honest and upfront about the challenges ahead. Crucially, it proposes solutions and charts a pathway to sustainability in all its dimensions that being environmental, economic and social, using a food systems approach, a more holistic view of agrifood and its interconnectiveness.

Food Vision outlines four high-level missions for the sector to achieve its vision of Ireland being a world leader in sustainable food systems. First, there is the mission called A Climate Smart, Environmentally Sustainable Agri-Food Sector that has an overall target of climate-neutrality by 2050 with verifiable progress by 2030, which is critical. There are seven goals in this mission that encompass: emissions reductions; carbon sequestration; improvements in air quality; restoration and enhancement of biodiversity; improvements in water quality; development of diverse forests; enhanced seafood sustainability; exploring the bio-economy; and strengthening Origin Green.

Mission 2 is for viable and resilient primary producers with enhanced well-being. The primary producers, who are our farmers, fishers and foresters, have a prominence and centrality in this strategy that sets it apart from its predecessors. There are four goals in this mission which involves: improving the competitiveness and productivity of primary producers; increasing the creation of value and distributing it fairly; introducing greater diversification in production systems and incomes; and improving the social sustainability of primary producers across areas

such as generational renewal, gender balance, health and safety, mental health and well-being and rural development. The family farm model is key to the three pillars of sustainability. We recognise that economically sustainable farmers, fishers and foresters are an integral part of the rural and coastal community, and that healthy environments, ecosystems, communities and economies go hand in hand.

Food Vision 2030 points the way to primary producers being providers of a much broader range of ecosystem services. While continuing to produce food, they will also be engaged in activities such as sequestering and capturing carbon, reducing emissions, supporting biodiversity, managing water resources, and protecting and enhancing soil health.

Mission 3 is called Food that is Safe, Nutritious and Appealing, Trusted and Valued at Home and Abroad. Mission 4 is called An Innovative, Competitive and Resilient Agri-Food Sector, Driven by Technology and Talent.

In November 2021, the all-of-government Climate Action Plan was launched. It commits Ireland to a legally binding target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions no later than 2050, and a reduction of 51% by 2030. The plan sets targets for each sector, including a 22% to 30% reduction in agricultural greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. This is an incredibly challenging target for the sector but one that is needed to contribute to the overall 51% economy-wide reduction. This means for agriculture emissions to reduce to between 16 to 18 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2030 then there must be an absolute reduction of between 5 to 7 metric tonnes.

The sector will also contribute additionally through reducing land-based emissions, and managing our soils, in particular peat soils, in a better way. This is a very ambitious target for the sector that I am confident that our farmers and fishers will achieve, and in doing so will require transformational change across the Irish agriculture landscape.

The agriculture sector due to its biological nature, coupled with the high level of methane in the emissions profile for agriculture, results in unique challenges, in particular when compared with other EU member states. In the absence of new technological innovations, and as long as the sector produces food, feed or fibre, there will always be residual emissions. However, we are not starting from a point of inaction, as we know. Plus the commitments within the Climate Action Plan build on progress to date.

The publication of the Climate Action Plan 2021 goes hand in hand with Food Vision 2030 thus ensuring that Ireland can continue to produce high-quality food in a manner that protects the environment and mitigates climate change. It is important that we drive this momentum forward from here on. Food Vision 2030 is about targeting increases in value growth rather than volume growth. It is about evolving and adjusting to a more sustainable way of farming that uses less inputs and relies instead on new technologies, and new practices.

One of the main policy frameworks contributing to environmental improvement, including climate change in agriculture, will be the Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan 2023-2027. The draft plan was submitted to the European Commission on 31 December 2021 and ahead of our regulatory requirement to do so. The Commission is now assessing our plan. Following this assessment, we expect to receive formal observations in late March or early April. Department officials will continue to engage with their Commission counterparts. It is anticipated that Commissioner Wojciechowski will provide an update on the approval process

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to all member states at the Council of Ministers meeting in March.

As Senators will be aware, the process of approving the three five-year carbon budgets, as proposed by the Climate Change Advisory Council, are currently being considered by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action. Reaching the ambition of 51% reduction in emissions places Ireland as a global leader in climate action but we must all recognise that reaching this target is not without its challenges. The Climate Action Plan sets out ranges for each sector so as to meet this ambition and all sectors, including agriculture, must play their part. The sectoral ceilings will be a matter for Government and will be developed after the carbon budgetary process. When setting these sectoral ceilings it is imperative, as outlined in the Climate Action and Low Development (Amendment) Act, that the special economic and social role of agriculture, including with regard to the distinct characteristics of biogenic methane, must be taken into account.

I thank colleagues for their engagement on this very important subject and for putting it on the agenda of the Seanad. Climate is one of my priorities as Minister, so these two hours will be a great opportunity to hear their views and comments. The Climate Action Plan identifies a series of actions that can deliver emissions reductions without the need to reduce numbers. There are known or existing measures that will get the sector close to the target range for the agriculture sector, which is based on maintaining animal numbers at current levels. There is a real opportunity to maximise emissions reductions through early adoption of such measures. Research in reducing agricultural emissions is promising and final animal numbers in 2030 will be determined not only by how technology and innovation delivers for the sector but also to what extent some livestock farmers embrace other opportunities or voluntarily diversify to other enterprises, for example, extending organic farming practices.

We have already laid out a roadmap for environmental ambition in Ag Climatise. This will be revised to align with the targets in the climate action plan. Reaching a target of between 16 to 18 Mt CO₂ eq in 2030 will require us to manage the emissions profile from the sector between now and then, through mobilisation of as many actions as possible. I look forward to the contributions of Senators.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I thank the Minister for being here. I pay tribute to him for the manner in which he has handled this matter and the courage he has shown in every county throughout the country, where he has met the grassroots and farmers in rural communities and listened to them. I was at one or two of those meetings. While 90% of the people present were excellent and there were hard debates, the Minister did take some abuse. In general, it has been accepted that he is doing an excellent job. He has taken a lot of the anger out of this entire debate. What he has done is go into communities and explain. He has a fantastic hold of his brief and that will stand to him. My family has been involved in agriculture, and I have been involved in horticulture in the past. I look forward to engaging with the Minister.

Sometimes when we listen, we learn a lot. The Minister went around and he listened. I have seen him at some of those engagements on his feet for three and a half hours. There is a consensus, even among people who might not otherwise agree with the Minister politically, that the manner in which he has handled this was productive in terms of allowing people to ask questions. He allowed them to vent their anger, and that happened, but in doing that he said something new to Irish farming that has not happened for a number of years. The Minister stated that he is here to listen and to work and engage with farmers. We all know that if you do not engage with people, you do not succeed. We must acknowledge that we have a challenge.

It does not matter who will be in power here in the years ahead, there will be the challenge of climate change. We must work with many other groups and all other sectors to ensure that at the end of the day we do what is necessary. I fear if we do not do that, in the long run the consequences for agriculture and rural communities will be great.

When I talk to many farmers one to one, they want to engage and to do the right thing environmentally. If we can come up with solutions to reduce nitrogen use and find alternatives such as pilot schemes that support farmers, they will work with that. There is a very interesting debate currently on the growing of clover. An increasing number of farmers are experimenting with this and they find it is working. I am not saying that we can completely reduce the use of nitrogen and other fertilisers, but we can cut it down and we can deal with the run-off from it. I say this as someone who is very pro rural communities, agriculture and horticulture. We must do that.

If I understand Bord Bia's analysis correctly, we are exporting food and drink to approximately 180 countries. Even with Brexit, those exports increased by about 4% last year. The dairy sector alone was worth €5 billion in 2021. The meat and livestock sector was worth €3.5 billion in exports. Not alone is it trying to sustain agricultural communities, but behind all of that there are thousands of people employed in all of this business. What the Minister is trying to do, which we have to do, is protect agriculture, horticulture and jobs. If we do not make some of the changes that are absolutely necessary, we will lose many of those jobs.

Much of what the Minister has been proposing to farmers on CAP and the expansion of the agricultural schemes remains to be fully decided on. It is very important to give options to farmers. I have discussed this with farmers. If they have six, seven or eight options to improve environmental standards on their farm, they will do it. They must also accept that it must be sustainable. In all honesty, some farmers in the past ten years have said to me that they have been carrying too much stock for the type of land they have. It may mean people reducing livestock numbers by five or ten. That might make all the difference. In some cases, it might be far more sustainable for the farmers involved.

I want to comment on the horticultural industry. There is substantial money involved in that industry. Perhaps we should pilot more horticultural schemes because we are still importing a huge amount of fruit and vegetables that used to be successfully grown in this country. I accept that the cost factor for farmers and horticulturists is one of the challenges. It does not pay to produce here. We should consider giving further supports and aid to those farmers. I read recently that we spent up to €100 million importing cooking apples into this country in 2020 or 2021. Many apples come from the south of France. Ireland has one of the best climates in the world for producing cooking apples. We should have pilot schemes for farmers who would like to diversify and convert two acres into an orchard. Years ago, there were orchards everywhere. Even small farms had ten, 12, 15 or 20 trees. Everybody had their own fruit. There is a market for that here in Ireland. That is just one issue. There are many other aspects of the horticulture business that I could mention and much that we could do, but I will not go into it all here today because I accept there is a cost factor involved.

I wish the Minister well. There are a lot of challenges. I will come up with ideas for him and I will be supportive of him. The challenge can be met. We can make agriculture very sustainable. It will be in all our interests to push forward with a plan that we can get the majority of farmers to accept. I accept that there will be hard decisions and that it will not suit everybody, but for the sake of the industry overall, we are on the right road. I compliment the Minister on

what he has done and the way he has engaged. That engagement is so important for the future.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. I notice the Minister does not have any officials with him, which is probably a testament to his mastery of his brief. I intend to try to test the latter a little. I have taken a disjunctive view of today's statements. It was proposed that we would have statements on agriculture and climate. They have a united meaning, but they also have a separate meaning. I do not expect the Minister to have answers off the top of his head in response to what I want to talk about today, which is the horse racing industry. I want to talk about the allegations that were made about doping being a major problem in horse racing. Hearings took place at the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, before which various representatives of the industry and the Department appeared. Those hearings led to the production of a report. I do not know if the Minister has had an opportunity to comment on the report or its recommendations in the Seanad. The issues that were discussed are live and serious. A number of recommendations were made, and these have implications for the Department and Government policy. The Government may have a view on some of the recommendations, generally or specifically. The context is that in recent years, a number of allegations have been made that suggest a serious examination of horse racing and integrity in horse racing is warranted. The Minister will be aware of articles in the *Sunday Independent* by Mr. Paul Kimmage and others and the intervention of Mr. Jim Bolger and so on. As I said, he will be aware the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine met during the summer gone by and heard from the various stakeholders. All of that is important to address because we need to protect and preserve-----

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): I am sorry for interrupting; the Senator is straying a little bit from the focus of the debate. It is very specific. The Senator is mentioning names. I know he said that-----

Senator Rónán Mullen: I certainly will not be mentioning any more names. It is within the agriculture brief and I explained that at the start.

Senator Eugene Murphy: Nice try.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I took a view that today's title was disjunctive rather than conjunctive. Is that the right way of putting it?

Senator Eugene Murphy: It was a very good try.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Anyway, we need to protect and preserve what is a vital sector within Ireland, both in terms of elite sporting achievement but also in terms of the number of jobs involved. We need to ensure that the great many people who love horse racing, including in my own family I might add, can continue to enjoy and contribute to a sport which is run to the best possible standards of fairness and integrity.

When the agriculture committee examined the sector last July to the extent that it did, and the extent to what it can do is limited in three hearings, it made reference to two broad areas, that is, the governance of the sector and the manner in which it regulates and monitors potential doping of horses. The Minister will be aware that major allegations were made, which came from a very credible quarter. I will leave it at that. We are not talking about random allegations from people with no knowledge of the sector.

The Minister will also be aware that the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board, IHRB, which

monitors for doping and is responsible for integrity in the sport, receives somewhere short of €10 million through Horse Racing Ireland, which in turn receives its money substantially from the betting taxes. He will be aware that is split approximately 80% between the horse racing industry and greyhounds.

I argued, and it was not disputed, that the current board structure of the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board, which has responsibility for doping, is very closed shop in that it is entirely an emanation of the Turf Club, effectively. When something comprises entirely industry insiders, some of whom might be engaged in very substantial commercial transactions with the very people they are regulating, there is at the very least a perception of a potential conflict of interest. It may be said, of course, that it is one thing to be on the board of an organisation and another to be operating. There is very little doubt, however, that there should be no connection at all between people who have any involvement in the owning, breeding, training or sale of horses and the regulation of integrity in the sport. There is absolutely no need for it. At the very least, we can say that any such body should have a majority of lay members, by which I mean people who do not have hand, act or part in owning, training, breeding and the purchase or sale of horses. There would also need to be an independent chair. That was substantially supported in the recommendations of the agriculture committee.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): The Senator is straying into a very specific area.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Deliberately so.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): This is a very broad debate in relation to agriculture and employment.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Yes.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): The Senator is putting forward very specific things around one sector within the agricultural sector.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Yes. The purpose of this Chamber is to allow people to come in on areas of expertise and interest to go for it and seek accountability.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): It is not relevant to the thrust of this debate.

Senator Rónán Mullen: It is highly relevant because it is within the Minister's brief.

(Interruptions).

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): It is very specific.

(Interruptions).

Senator Rónán Mullen: It is climate and agriculture. It does not have to be confined to both.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: It is not an Oxford comma.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): It is not in the spirit of the debate, in fairness.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I do not think anybody can object to the fact that I am raising serious and important points. I am not making any allegations.

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Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): I am not taking that away from the Senator.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I am taking this opportunity to ask the Minister to address something that to my knowledge he has not addressed in the Seanad so far.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): The Minister is not in a position to do so. As the Senator himself pointed out in his opening remarks, this is very specific. The Minister is not aware of it-----

Senator Rónán Mullen: I was not faulting-----

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): -----and the Senator is not expecting the Minister to answer this either.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Precisely. I am taking this opportunity to inform him and see what he wishes to say in response to the concerns I have raised and the questions I am asking. These issues are too important not to take every opportunity to bring them up. The shocking mistreatment of retired horses, which was exposed in a BBC “Panorama” report, was also discussed during the hearings of that Oireachtas committee. These are important issues. The committee published its report on 9 November. I believe enough time has passed to enable the Minister to at least give a general view or commit to giving some kind of response to the recommendations of the committee. Perhaps he has done so already.

I will leave it at that. There are a number of recommendations in the report; approximately 11. The particular area I have focused on, however, is the need for governance change at the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board, having regard to all the money it receives indirectly from the State. The question is whether the Government intends to leave it to the IHRB to clean up its own house or if it has been in communication to say it expects that certain changes will be made, and whether the Government will move to ensure such changes by way of legislation in the event that change is not forthcoming.

No alternative point of view was expressed at the committee. It is an open and shut case that the governance of the IHRB is a closed shop and nobody dissented from the argument that this needs to change. The Minister has responsibility for agriculture. It is important that he should have a view on it and that we would know at some point what his view is in order that we can then decide whether we want to be talking about crafting legislation in this House to try to address something as important as that. I am not trying to hold the Minister to giving a detailed response today; far from it. As I said, however, it is too important not to take this opportunity to bring it up.

Senator Tim Lombard: I welcome the Minister to the House. I will take this opportunity not to speak on horses but perhaps to speak on climate and agriculture if possible. In many ways, the agricultural community has been a leading player when it comes to the change of agricultural practices, in particular in the last few years. It feels that in many ways this has not been acknowledged. We all realise that climate change is a core part of our society and life, and that changes in practice in transportation, energy production and farming are all key to us making sure we reach our targets in 2050. As the Minister rightly said, they are ambitious without a shadow of a doubt.

We need to probably start telling the story about what farming has done over the last few decades and in many ways over the last few years. The story of us producing enough food for

50 million people is a starting point. We are a really significant player in the world food market. We provide food for so many people, particularly in the European Union. If we look at where we went from the Second World War to now, Ireland has become a real driver in that regard. That is the subject people do not mention or talk about enough.

We might look at our fertiliser practices and what we have changed, in particular over the last 24 months. That is a really significant statement. Over the last 24 months, more than 6,500 farmers are now spreading the majority, if not all, of their slurry by the trailing shoe method. If I had stood in the Seanad Chamber in 2016 and said that, I would have been laughed out of the House. That happened because of significant investment by the Department through the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, in particular, and infrastructure such as the trailing shoe slurry tanker. Nearly every dairy farmer in my part of the world at the moment is spreading slurry with the trailing shoe, which means we are saving more than 80% of the ammonium going into the atmosphere and also bringing nitrogen directly down into the plant. That is a really positive story about farming changing and moving with the times and becoming more economical with fertilisers, in particular the manures.

Farmers know one thing. They know that 25 years ago they sold their product because of traceability. We needed to make sure our product was traceable and that there was traceability from the fork all the way to where the animal was born. That came about because of the foot and mouth outbreak at the time. Now it is about making sure our product is sustainable. If we are to get access to the global markets of 50 million people, which we are doing, our product will not sell unless it is sustainable, which it is in so many different aspects. We need to start talking about the sustainable product we have. We have opportunities to expand the farming remit of so many farmers and to incorporate them into other parts of agriculture.

I will often say that farmers need to be a part of the solution when it comes to forestry. The number of farmers who are not involved in the forestry game at the moment because of certain issues within the sector is unfortunate. There is potential for farmers in every part of Ireland to be involved in forestry. However, that will probably take a change of ethos within the Department, as well as a change of ethos in other issues. In particular, I mean the licensing issue and the afforestation programme. If we had farmers who had 100 acres planted, maybe not on their own land but somewhere else, for a significant part of an area in forestry, that would be an exceptional driver for the economy and for the environment. There is serious potential there, but we just need to tap into it. That is one of the things we need to start talking about. Senator Murphy's analogy of cooking apples was stark. Every farmer who I know of probably had as an acre or two. That provides a potential to cover this, but we need to start thinking about it. I realise that the new CAP reforms give potential in that regard. Again, we need to start talking about that. A certain percentage of one's landholding can now be a part of that solution.

Down in my part of the world, we are blessed with distilleries. We have wonderful distilleries in west Cork, Clonakilty and down in Midleton. These are world drivers in the distilling market. They do not reach the peak of the market unless they are sustainable. That is why they are there. What we have done in that industry alone is an acknowledgement of how that industry has embraced change and how it has become part of the solution. I want to acknowledge the distilleries for what they have done, in the amount of local employment they give, but also in how they interact with the farming community. Hundreds of acres of malt and barley are grown every year. That is a big driver in these towns. West Cork Distillers employs 20% of the population of Skibbereen. That is the driver in our economy. That is a significant driver for us. We need to start promoting and talking about that.

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I had the pleasure of going to Bandon with the Minister a few months ago to visit the Farm Zero C project at the Carbery farm. It will be involved in making sure that the farming community has the ability to learn how it can reduce its carbon footprint in dairy farms in west Cork. That is a knowledge transfer scheme and a test farm. It is bringing in different varieties of grass. It is proving how technology can be part of the solution. It is also bringing in groups of farmers. That is the chain. When we can bring farmers onto farms to show them the new farming practices then we make the changes. We make significant changes. The Minister and I had a wonderful afternoon that day. That is the kind of project that we need to promote and talk about.

Today, the farming community in many ways feels that it is being blamed for absolutely everything. Farmers do not think they are getting the acknowledgement for the amount of food and economic prosperity that they have brought to rural Ireland. We need to change this narrative. Farming is a good news story. It has achieved so much in such a short space of time. It is not the problem, it is the solution. So many people want to consider it just to be the problem. I would say to the Minister that the narrative must change. It must be about positive farming and about showing exactly what we have achieved in a short space of time. When we move to the new technologies, such as the protected urea, protected fertilisers and the new varieties of grass they are growing in Bandon in that Farm Zero C project, that is the future and that is why we will be a viable agricultural industry going forward. However, if we keep with the narrative of hammering the farming community and talking it down, we will see unfortunate knock-on effects for rural Ireland.

This debate here today in the Seanad is an important one. It gives an opportunity to our Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to lay out his thoughts about how we are going to reach our targets. It also gives Members of the Seanad an opportunity to talk up farming, to talk up what it has achieved and to acknowledge that they are up for the challenge and that they will succeed in climate change and in reaching these targets.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pat Casey): Senator Boylan has eight minutes.

Senator Lynn Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. I will stick to the topic and I will not bring up greyhounds, which is my hobby horse under agriculture-----

Senator Rónán Mullen: I would encourage the Senator to go broad here. It is the only chance she will get.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate on climate change in agriculture. I apologise that I cannot stay until the end, but I will be following the debate.

We are at a pivotal moment when it comes to tackling climate change. The window for action is closing by the day. The future generations are watching us now. They will look back in despair at the last decade, about not only how we wasted those years to take climate action, but also about how we had a Fine Gael Government for the last ten years that played a negative role in international climate change negotiations. Then, domestically, it took policy decisions that have made the mountain we must now climb on climate action even more onerous.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 was passed last year. I welcome that it was passed with the support of the vast majority of Members of both Houses. There was a small minority of Deputies who did not support that Bill. The Act has

finally set in place a framework for us as a country to bind this Government and future Governments, whoever they might be, to a trajectory of emissions reductions.

The carbon budgets are still to be brought to the Dáil and the Seanad. They will set out the pathway for how we will reach those reductions across all sectors. That includes agriculture. The trajectory of those emissions cuts will be challenging for all sectors. Last week, the climate action committee heard from various stakeholders. These were stakeholders that represent business interests, the trade unions, Social Justice Ireland, as well as stakeholders that represent the Irish Farmers Association, IFA. They were there to present.

There was an acceptance from most of the sectors that the days of shirking responsibilities in climate action are over. We all accept that fairness and social justice have to be at the heart of climate action, not just because it is the right thing to do - because it is - but also because we have to bring communities along with us on this process. That means that no sector can get a bye-ball. Special treatment for one sector inevitably means that somebody else in society has to take up the slack. It is time now for leaders in all areas of society to show the leadership that the public is crying out for, to engage with the stakeholders and with the industries they represent and to be honest about the scale of the challenge we face as a society. That said, sometimes we have a tendency, particularly people like me who have followed climate action for so many years and who have studied it, to get so frustrated and have anxiety about the lack of action that is being taken. However, climate action also presents us with huge opportunities. This is an opportunity to fundamentally change how we organise society and how we organise the economy.

The same goes for how we produce our food, how we value how that food is produced, how we use our land and how we value the land that produces that food. Take, for example, organic farming. For years, organic farming has been neglected by Government policy in this country, and it shows. We are at the bottom of the EU table. I think Malta is the only country that is lower than us in how much agricultural land we have dedicated to organic farming. Our figure is 2%. The EU average is 8.5%, but we are on 2%.

There has been a lack of ambition. In fact, there was a point at which one could not even enter the system. If one wanted to be an organic farmer, the system was closed to one. We now have a target of 7.5% by 2030. That will not even bring us up to the EU average today. Meanwhile, the EU is storming ahead and setting targets of 25% by 2030. For so long, we have heard that Irish agriculture thrives on a sustainable green reputation, but there is a lack of support for organics. That undermines that reputation, but it also does nothing to support farmers who want to go into organics. Sinn Féin is proposing an additional €15 million for organics in 2022 alone. I do not think there is any reason we should be waiting for the new CAP to begin properly funding a conversion so that farmers can convert to organics. We can learn from our EU counterparts. There is a reason countries are storming ahead when it comes to this issue. Denmark, for example, mandated supermarkets to stock organic produce. They created the market for farmers. They told farmers to go organic and they guaranteed them there would be a market for their produce in the supermarkets. Sinn Féin would like to see Teagasc and Bord Bia resourced with ring-fenced funding to promote organics and give farmers the confidence that there will be a market for their produce.

I understand, coming from a privileged position in a well-paid job, that this is not practical for everyone but I would also encourage members of the public, where they can, to buy from the wonderful farms out there, including in Dublin, that are bypassing supermarkets and the large meat processors and selling their products directly. This ensures the farmer gets the maximum

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value for the produce he or she produces and it also ensures that the food chain is shortened, the quality of food is better and the life span of the food is increased. This in turn reduces food waste, which is another high source of greenhouse gas emissions.

I would like to discuss forestry. We know that trees sequester oxygen from our carbon dioxide from the time they are planted but most of the net carbon sequestration is in the period after when they are about ten years old. If we are planting trees today then most of that carbon sequestration will be post-2030. The failure in afforestation today not only affects our ability to meet our 2030 targets but it also has implications for our future 2050 targets. Each year we are missing out on millions of tonnes of carbon sequestration. Last year we planted 2,000 ha when we need to plant 15,000 ha of new forests each year to get to net zero by 2050.

A lot needs to be done to turn the ship around when it comes to forestry but the first action has to be to resolve the issue with the system itself. We need to establish a system that is fit for purpose, well-resourced, screens out the bad planning applications, is compliant with the Aarhus Convention and does not block people out from making objections. We must screen out the bad applications, make it Aarhus compliant and have a statutory period in which a decision is provided to applicants. We also need to protect the native woodlands we already have. We have fragments of oceanic temperate rainforest that need to be given the space to do their thing and expand. National parks are under threat and we all watched in horror last year at what was going on in Killarney National Park. The research suggests that the older woodlands slowed down that fire. I am hoping that the review of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, will give the service the resources to go after anybody who is caught illegally burning or cutting hedgerows and to make sure those people face the full rigours of the law.

I want to quickly look at the international food system and what Ireland needs to do. I know that Ireland has recognised the principle of agroecology and its role in building sustainable food systems. That needs to be backed up with action so I would like to see Ireland increase the proportion of overseas development aid spent on agriculture and food systems that are targeted at scaling up agroecology initiatives. I would also call for the State to ratify the Nagoya protocol on access and benefit sharing, which allows traditional knowledge and ensures a trade policy is fair, inclusive and does not facilitate the oligarchic market control by agribusiness and the privatisation of biodiversity.

I call on the Irish Government to support a binding UN treaty on business and human rights to regulate the activities of transnational corporations, allowing communities, particularly indigenous communities in the global south, to have their human rights upheld.

Senator Erin McGreehan: I welcome the Minister to the Seanad. It is always great to have an opportunity to speak about agriculture and climate change in this Chamber. As the Minister well knows, I am passionate about our indigenous industry. Agriculture is who I am, how I was reared, how I rear my children and part of my daily life. The Minister highlighted his commitment to his brief and to his community. He mentioned how he has travelled around every single county in the Republic asking farmers their opinions during his consultation phase. That has to be rewarded. The Minister is the first Minister to have done that so I applaud and congratulate him for doing that. The day we had him in Ardee to meet our Louth farmers was a great one and I look forward to welcoming him again because I know he has an awful lot of friends in County Louth.

We all know that agriculture and our rural landscape are what Ireland is known for. All

across the world our beautiful land and top quality produce is well-known. We are the emerald island and the green island and we know we have a lot of work to do to make this country green and sustainable by name and by nature. We have huge targets of 51% reductions in our overall greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and that will set us on the path for the zero emissions by 2050 target. I know we can do this by working together across all Departments and industries. I have been advocating for strong environmental policies for as long as I can remember since I created a green team in my primary school so I was pushing for this 20 years ago. This is what we all believe and as a farmer's daughter, I was brought up to know that we have to look after our countryside, animals, produce and what we create on this island. We have to step up in every single industry to make sure we bring everyone with us.

We know significant changes are needed and significant decisions are being made in every aspect. However, it also sometimes feels that the agricultural community is under fire, although not by the Minister or the Department. It feels like it is being blamed by society for every single carbon emission in our country. We have to look at our transport industry, the lack of sustainable packaging, the waste in our public sector and our buildings and hospitals with windows being left open with the heat on. We need joined-up thinking, we cannot blame farmers for everything and I know the Minister does not do that.

We all know farmers want to change. They want to protect what they have on their land but if Members will pardon the pun, the environment is so tense. Farmers are working under pressure and in volatile circumstances to an incredibly tight margin. When farmers do not receive a cost price for what they produce, never mind a profit, it is understandable how worried farmers are. I know there is space for afforestation but we have to change our attitude towards this and reduce the bureaucracy of planting and harvesting and make it accessible. We have to build the rewards of tree planting and put the protection of our hedgerows into the rewards scheme. We must match the sequestration by trees and hedgerows to the production of food. We should measure it, highlight it and scream it from the rooftops because we know our farmers are sustainable and that an awful lot of what they produce is already carbon neutral. There are other greenhouse gases but I imagine they are on top of being carbon neutral as it stands.

As someone who grew up on a small beef suckler farm I know that struggle and I know the disappointment at a table when the cheque comes and one is not getting the cost price for one's animals. It is a fairly depressing day when that cheque arrives on the table and it does not cover the costs. I welcome the Minister's commitment to the national food ombudsman to make sure we have fair trading practices and to implement the directive that was highlighted in the Minister's spring legislation.

I also want to highlight the importance of protecting the tiny animals we have in this country, that is, the bees. We must support our colleague, Senator Martin, with his Bill, which I seconded in this House. The Minister knows I am a huge advocate for looking after our bees and our native biodiversity and trees. We have an opportunity to preserve the native bee in this country and we can do that by banning the importation of bees. We can do so on an environmental basis and we should forget about the EU law on the free movement of goods. We have a good rationale for the protection of our bees and I hope we can do that and move forward in an ambitious way because I am ambitious for agriculture and climate change in this country.

Senator John McGahon: We can all agree that farmers are the custodians of the land and the best-placed people to know exactly how to implement some of the measures we are trying to bring in. It is important that we try to tone and dial back the negativity towards people in

the farming community and in agriculture. Instead we should let farmers show how we can empower them and how they can do the job properly. They are the solution and not the problem in being able to tackle some of the climate challenges we have. We have to pursue changes that will enable farmers to continue to produce world-class food while at the same time lowering their carbon footprint. We must make sure that these changes benefit farming families financially while also protecting and helping the environment. There are a few key changes that can be considered, one of which is reducing the average age of slaughter from 27 months to 24 months. This would have the equivalent effect of removing 500,000 cows from the herd. It would require collaboration with stakeholders in the beef sector and a focus on practices at farm level to ensure that beef animals reach the required weight at an earlier stage. That is something we could seriously consider.

Changing our practices, as Senator Lombard suggested, around the use of fertiliser would see farmers using less and using types that produce less emissions. This means farmers could maintain the same level of production but at a reduced cost. We should also look at how we can improve genetics and how we feed our beef and dairy herds to ensure a reduction in the emissions they produce while improving their productivity. The aforementioned are options that we are committed to pursuing.

Carbon farming is another very interesting area. Not only must we reduce agriculture's overall emissions but we must also increase its potential to sequester carbon. That is why the carbon farming framework is so important. It is a system that rewards farmers for removing carbon from the atmosphere. The development of that model is to be explored and the aim is to produce a strategy on it by 2023. We must continue this journey. We must acknowledge that people involved in agriculture are the solution. They are the people who know it best and I very much trust in their judgment.

Senator Seán Kyne: The Minister is welcome. I would like to acknowledge the tour of Ireland that he did during the summer and autumn of last year. It was a valuable exercise in meeting stakeholders face to face in various marts. I visited Maam Cross mart with the Minister and also attended a meeting in Athenry a number of weeks later alongside public representatives from Galway East and Galway West. Farmers have real concerns about a number of different challenges, including the new CAP regime that has been put in place, the new situation with regard to entitlements and the changing of that sphere and also issues such as gas prices which have resulted in a dramatic increase in fertiliser prices.

In terms of the objective to reduce the use of fertiliser, price will play a very important part in reducing output this year. The work and research being done by Teagasc on sequestration and the use of clover and multi-species swards is very important. The early finishing research on the Newford herd in Athenry is also hugely important and proves that early finishing is possible. Not every farmer will be able to do it but there are farmers who can, depending on breed type, husbandry and the quality of their land. There is potential in early finishing and it could be a game changer for Ireland in reducing our emissions. There are too many cattle being finished at too late a stage and they are contributing to our carbon and methane output.

The sequestration of carbon is hugely important. A small number of farmers seem to have an aversion to planting trees and that issue came up at the meeting in Athenry. They felt they were too productive but everyone has to play their part in this. They have to be able to show that on their farm, they are contributing to helping the overall situation in the country. I commend the Department's plans and hope stakeholders will be able to work with the Minister and

Department to improve the final outcome.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister to the House and join others in acknowledging the significant communications campaign he undertook. It was unusual in that the Minister took the time to tour marts, when he could and when it was safe to do so. I attended two marts and to see the Minister in the ring, not selling animals but selling policies, was really good. It was a real hands-on approach to engagement and it was appreciated. Those who know about cattle dealing and cattle marts are the heart of politics, agricultural language and discussion. Many people go to the marts, not necessarily to sell but to meet their colleagues and friends, have a bowl of soup or a sandwich, do business and trade. They barter and exchange politics and agriculture there. The mart is really important and I want to acknowledge that.

I looked at the climate action plan for 2021 which contains 41 designated actions, as outlined in section 16.4. There are actions related to the marine and forestry which I do not intend to go into in any great detail. I want to spend some time talking about organic farming and organic horticulture. Farmers know that agriculture and climate change are inextricably linked. Indeed, they are inseparable. Farmers have ambitions not just to produce food but to do it in a sustainable, productive and, dare I say it, profitable manner, and why not? They need the full support of Government and Government agencies in achieving these clear objectives.

A just transition is not an optional or extra policy but a legally binding obligation resulting from Ireland's commitment to tackling climate change. That has to be pointed out and we must face up to it. Climate justice is an ethical and political issue, not just an environmental one, and we need to emphasise that as part of our discussions today. Farmers need substantial financial support for transition too. This is important in the context of sustainable eco-schemes and funding for same. Farmers need funding, incentives, encouragement and support for the transition. There are many changes and new ways of doing business in agriculture and horticulture with which farmers need assistance and support. I ask the Minister to share with us further details on the schemes and incentives he is proactively developing. Supporting and incentivising farmers to move to more sustainable methods is inextricably linked to a just transition. We must leave no individuals, communities, economies, sectors or regions behind as we seek a transition to a low-carbon future and address climate change.

Last year, Organic Growers Ireland appeared before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine. That organisation's primary role is to present the needs and views of organic growers and farmers, support the effective and dynamic promotion of organic produce, identify training needs, improve access to technical information on organic horticulture and agriculture and, most importantly, encourage new entrants into organic horticulture and agriculture. The organisation has called for an organic farming internship programme to be developed, expanded, supported and resourced, and I support that call. It has also called for greater research into organic crop production and additional advisory services. This is an area that has been left lagging behind. Ireland has a clean, green image, yet it has the second lowest level of organic farmland production in the European Union. What does that say about us? We have an image that is both clean and green but our organic production is the second lowest in the EU. We must do better. We must think bigger and support organic farmers.

I draw the Minister's attention to a number of key objectives in the 2021 climate action plan. One is to promote an increase in legume crops in the agricultural system, while another is to increase the current area under organic production from 74,000 ha to 350,000 ha by 2030. That will require a lot of work. Another key objective is to build up our organic research capacity.

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One further key objective is to double the supply of biomass which is very important in the context of fuel supplies.

I thank the Minister for coming to the House today and ask him to place an emphasis on organic horticulture and agriculture in the months ahead. We must support people in this transition and always remember that it is a just transition. It is an economic, social and environmental transition and that is the key message that we must continue to drive home.

6 o'clock

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister for coming to the House. Like Senator Kyne, I compliment him on the work he has done since taking up his brief. In particular, I compliment him on listening to the voices of the farming community and visiting the marts around the country. The latter was a useful exercise.

Farmers are front-line workers in the battle against climate change. What farmers are looking for is sustainability. They want to ensure that farm families can be sustained from a financial point of view but they are also committed to addressing the climate and biodiversity challenges. As other contributors noted, farmers know and can see the impact of climate change on the ground and in the context of what happens in their communities.

It is important that the Minister should start to roll out some of the incentives for farms to move in a green direction. I am thinking especially of solar panels and renewable energy on farms. We have got to give the incentives and clarity to farmers to be able to make greater use of those panels. I have spoken before about anaerobic digestion, AD. I am concerned that we have not been ambitious enough in some of our targets. I was very struck reading Darragh McCullagh in the *Irish Independent* where he points out that there are only ten AD plants in the State compared with almost 50 in the North. Compared with the approach in other countries, we are not being ambitious. If we want to look at slashing emissions from slurry, we do need to look at seriously investing in AD, not only in large scale plants but in smaller plants too, in order to make it sustainable.

In the context of something that goes towards giving farmers an income, I have always favoured a carbon credits trading scheme. We all want to see more trees being planted but there is a situation where if farmers invest in measures that will ensure that there is carbon sequestration they do not benefit directly from the carbon credits. It is almost a communist system. The State is the one that controls it. Whereas if we allow the individual farmer or landowner to control their own carbon credits and be able to trade them, that may ultimately generate income for them.

I welcome Teagasc's investment of considerable time into research on carbon sequestration in our soils and what can be done in this regard. Some of the work that it is being done would have been helpful a number of years ago. It is essential that we look to invest in a big way in research. Partnership between Teagasc and the farming community in that area will be important.

Unlike Senator Mullen, I will not stray. There was not an Oxford comma after climate. The phrase "Climate and Agriculture" is very clearly used in the title to this debate.

Senator Rónán Mullen: The joys of the Seanad. We can all -----

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Senator Mullen has been known for flogging several dead horses

over the years. Maybe in this debate that was not a surprise.

(Interruptions).

Senator Malcolm Byrne: The Minister knows that peat has been an ongoing hot topic. I would argue that our horticulture sector is perhaps one of the greenest sectors in agriculture. Those involved in horticulture and mushroom growing want to ensure that everything they do is done in a green and environmentally sustainable way. They want to make sure that their produce is green and branded as such. Now that we are moving into the spring season, I would ask that we finally resolve the issue surrounding peat. We cannot have a situation where this country continues to import peat. There must be a way to support those small growers. I am totally opposed to the use of peat for burning. The Government's science on that is correct, but we need to resolve the issue for those in horticulture and mushroom growing.

I agree with Senator Lombard and others. This is about farmers being seen as front-line contributors to the battle against climate change. We cannot continue to heap blame on farmers and farm families. The Minister's approach has been the correct one and I commend him for his work on that area. I just encourage him to continue do as he has been doing and to continue to be ambitious.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call Senator Pauline O'Reilly. I have not had the opportunity of congratulating her on the singular honour of becoming chairperson of her political party nationally. That is a huge achievement. It is with great pleasure that I call her to speak.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach, and I thank all the Senators for their support. The Minister is very welcome. I am delighted to see him here to discuss this really important topic of climate and agriculture. He will know that I am a member of the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action. This is an issue that is really close to my heart.

It is important to say that environmentalists, myself included, do not point the finger of blame at farmers. That is a really important message. Because the emissions from agriculture are 37% of our overall emissions, it is important that we discuss the matter. However, we can do so in a respectful manner and in a way which means that we do not single out farmers. I do not think that farming families are being pointed at but I do understand why people might feel they are. The media has a part to play in not pitting people against each other.

Consumers want a greener product. Macra na Feirme representatives appeared before the joint committee. One of the things those farmers asked for was access to ecologists. Farmers of the future know that this is where we are moving, that consumers across Europe want a greener, sustainable product and that is coming closer to home in Ireland. Much of what we produce in this country is exported, which means that we will have to stay on top of it. Where does the blame lie? In some respects, it lies with practices that have not led farmers in the right direction. It might have been because things were not known and because the climate and biodiversity crises were not fully understood. We only have to think back a few decades when we would have seen much more biodiversity on farms that we grew up around. That really has changed and nobody knows it better than a farmer who is out there with his or her hands in the earth. They know that. They want support, and the Department wants to support them.

The committee is looking at emissions ceilings. Its work in that regard will eventually be sent to the Minister's Department. It is important that we have the greatest ambition because that serves farmers. It is also important that we seek to go beyond that. That might sound like

pie in the sky, but things are changing. Even the attitude towards nitrogen fertiliser is changing. More people are talking about multispecies than ever before. Things change and move on. There are opportunities for farmers. Look at the farmers who are the subject of the derogation. The latter is really only concentrated around 5% of farmers. It is not the small farms in the west or the majority of farms; it relates to very intensive farming. We are going to have to step up to the mark, address this matter and pull the lid back on it. We cannot say that it is to do with every farmer. It is not even about blaming those farmers; it is about moving in a different direction and supporting them to do so.

Breastfeeding and how we support it is something very close to my heart. The Minister for Health has made improvements in that area and has put in place lactation consultants across the country. The agriculture industry also has a part to play. It is not accidental that we have a very low breastfeeding rate in Ireland, a country which is one of the largest exporters of formula milk or, at least, the product that becomes formula milk. We export to Asia. This industry is worth €1 billion a year, and with it comes a huge responsibility. China's breastfeeding rates have dropped from 60% to 30%. The availability of formula contributes to that no matter what we think. Not everyone can breastfeed but everyone should have the opportunity to avoid a bombardment of advertising which promotes something that is fundamentally not the healthiest way to go. It is a healthy alternative if one cannot breastfeed but it should not be the first port of call. If 70% of a population is using formula, there is something wrong that we need to examine. We cannot put money and industry above health. The World Health Organization has stated that breastfeeding is the way to support healthy children and mothers. That must be a part of the conversation about food, nutrition and how we value our infants and children. Some 84% of women in Ireland go into hospital wanting to breastfeed and only 37% come out breastfeeding. It is not just about thinking about people who go into hospital and want something different. This is about supporting people who want to breastfeed and helping them to achieve their goals.

Another area on which I want to touch is animal welfare because the Minister is here and the matter falls under his remit. It is important to say that there are two ships due to dock in Libya. I have been told this by the animal welfare group within the Green Party. I raised this issue before Christmas when storms were raging and the *Finola M* vessel was stuck in a storm. The concern at the time was that there were no vets on board. I would like some assurances that now the pandemic is coming to an end, vets will be on board these ships, at the very least. That is not to talk about my aversion to live export in general. On this one issue, we need to make sure the animals are well taken care of and there are vets on board.

I will also raise the matter of Rossaveal and investment in our ports. It has been identified that the coast of Connemara is one of the areas for the development of offshore wind. I know that the development of some of the ports is under the Minister's remit. I would like to hear what is happening with Rossaveal Port. We know we need deep-water ports if we are to advance floating offshore wind. It could create considerable employment off the west coast, as it will off the east and south coasts. Much of the wind is off the west coast. We need to have a pipeline in place for offshore renewables.

Senator Garret Ahearn: If it is agreeable, I will share half my time with Senator Maria Byrne.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Garret Ahearn: The Minister is welcome to the Chamber. I will follow on from

the comments made by Senators Malcolm Byrne and Kyne about the work the Minister did before Christmas in visiting marts. I was at a mart with the Minister in Thurles and I think he was there for four and a half hours. If anyone says the Minister is not willing to talk to ordinary farmers on the ground, that was not the experience I had with him in Thurles. After the meeting, the view was that the Minister was there to listen and take on board what everyone said. He was not necessarily there to agree with what everyone said but he was there to listen and take on board the concerns of people in my area. I thank him for that.

I acknowledge yesterday's announcement of the GLAS traditional farm building grant scheme to a value of €25,000. Every farmer in the country has a building that could do with being done up. Old buildings and sheds could now be used. I encourage people in Tipperary and anywhere else who have buildings of that kind to avail of this scheme. It is a good scheme. Buildings of that sort have been let go for the past 20, 25, 30 and 40 years. It is important for farmers to use that scheme.

There are many matters on which I could touch but I only have a short time to speak. When the Minister was previously in the Chamber, I talked to him about the increased price of fertiliser for farmers and the additional cost of it in 2022. That is going to be a burden on many farmers. I asked the Minister at the time if he could do something to support farmers with a scheme. Many schemes have been set up to support farmers in other areas, especially when they go through difficult periods. We need to do something for farmers because of the cost of fertiliser. Last year was a good year for many sectors in farming and most farmers accept that. However, the cost of fertiliser is going to be a huge issue. Farmers recognise that they need to reduce the use of fertiliser but that will happen gradually. We need to do something to support them now.

It was announced today that fuel costs in Ireland are the highest in the world. That will have a significant impact on the agricultural industry this year. I would appreciate it if the Minister could support farmers.

Senator Maria Byrne: The Minister is welcome. I thank him for coming in to discuss this important topic. I believe the agricultural sector wants to make changes and ensure it can perform in the most environmentally friendly ways. We must remember that the changes we are expecting are big. For the sector to make these appropriate changes, the targets must be realistic and supports must be offered. I know the Minister and the Department have been offering many supports. I acknowledge, as my colleagues have, the engagement that the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, have had with people on the Common Agricultural Policy and the work they have put into it. That is important. To address the interests of the agricultural sector and the targets it has to meet, all must be involved. We must involve farmers, researchers, the Department, industry, policymakers and advisory bodies. Education is also important. During the past two years, many farmers have been attending online courses and learning other ways to do things. We must build on that, going forward.

Senator Murphy mentioned clover. On a visit to Grange in County Meath, I learned that people there are researching clover and its advantages. That is being rolled out across the country. Teagasc is doing wonderful work in terms of research and innovation, and I compliment it on that.

An enormous budget has been put in place for CAP. The 2023-2027 plan was recently sent to Europe. I compliment the Department on the work that went into that.

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Senator Malcolm Byrne raised the importation of peat. That is having a knock-on effect on horticulturists and people who grow plants. Those people are having to import peat and the costs involved are considerable. It is something that needs to be looked at. We must support our own farmers.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I wish to share time with Senator Dolan.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: The Minister is very welcome. I concur with the comments of other Senators about the Minister's visits to all 26 counties. I was in Granard mart when the Minister visited. He gave his time. We did not agree with everything that was said but everyone got to say what they wanted to say. It was important that farmers' views were heard. It is important, leading into any decision with regard to the emissions percentages in agriculture, that there is a full discussion with all farm organisations.

I have a couple of issues to raise. I have spoken to members of the Irish Farmers Association about the beef environmental efficiency programme and the needs in that regard. They have a request that an extra €60 million from the national budget will go into that scheme.

Senator Malcolm Byrne mentioned solar energy and there is an opportunity to utilise the shed space provided by poultry and dairy units and agricultural sheds throughout the country. Solar panels can be installed to create energy that will ultimately feed back into the grid. That will reduce energy usage but provide farm income. It is important significant grants are put in place in that regard.

The introduction of a food regulator was promised. At what stage is that progressing? It has not happened yet but it is important that would be delivered shortly. Members of the Irish Farmers Association are protesting outside Lidl in Cavan today about chicken and egg prices. Many of the multiples are cutting their prices. Irish people want to see Irish products on Irish shelves and everybody would want to get them at a bargain price but, ultimately, it is the farmers who do not get a fair price for their products when those product prices are cut. They are seeking an increase of 15 cent per chicken and 2 cent per egg. When will we have a regulator who will regulate this product market?

I concur with the comments on the price of fertiliser. That has all been said. We need to examine and address that issue. More importantly, there needs to be full engagement with the farming sector.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome the Minister, Deputy McConalogue and pay tribute to his proactive work. It feels strange being here in this House considering we meet in mart rings most of the time. The Minister has heard comments and feedback from colleagues and people from the west. His work is very much appreciated. Taking into account the types of farming in the west, this debate is crucial.

The Minister will have heard many farm families ask whether there is a future in agriculture. The young people we met in marts, many of whose parents were with them, spoke about that. We want to get the message across that there is a future in agriculture. There has been strong trade in the recent period. There is talk of prices being kept up because everybody is returning to eating out in restaurants. There will be really good prices for beef in the next period. We know from Bord Bia that record agrifood, food and drink exports have been hit. Exports to

Africa have grown by 12% and to south-east Asia by 20%. It is crucial Bord Bia is doing that job of increasing food and drink exports, which will have an impact for farmers.

As Fine Gael spokesperson on research and innovation, my focus is on how we can support farming families with technology to meet these targets. It involves everything we have done previously. The Minister might comment on funding for that with respect to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Teagasc, the Walsh fellowships and Science Foundation Ireland. There are joint research programmes with many of our third level universities. We now have Mountbellew Agricultural College, a university campus town as part of the new Atlantic alliance. It was agreed today in committee that the start date for that will be 1 April this year. We hear from Mountbellew Agricultural College that many young farmers are innovating ranging from grassland management to reducing the use of fertiliser to low-emission slurry-spreading. They are learning new practices. They are able to tackle the challenges ahead of us. They will lead the way in the same way as many of our farming families.

On renewable energy, it is important to support farmers to use solar panels, renewable energy on farms and to be able to feed back into the grid. Another issue is how we will reduce costs or challenges we face with fertiliser and fuel costs.

I acknowledge the appointment of the new head of organics in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It is crucial there is that focus in the Department. I would also mention the number of signpost farms in organic farming and the question of how will we support families in rural areas to consider engaging in organic farming. There is an interest, particularly among women coming through into farming, in organics and how we can develop that.

The Origin Green programme is crucial. I am not sure if the Minister will have time to answer some of those queries in his response but I acknowledge the work that has been done. I stress that at all time there is such hope for farming families. I really had to get that message across.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: As that concludes Members' contributions, it is my pleasure to call on the Minister to respond to the debate. I want to acknowledge, and I know I speak for all the Members of this House, the Minister's willingness and the degree to which he goes out of his way to engage with people, both farmers and representatives, across the country. It is quite incredible the levels to which he goes to meet people on the ground, and it should be acknowledged.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach for his kind remarks. I thank all the Members for this very constructive debate. It has been very informative. I have enjoyed the engagement and it has been very productive. The tone of this debate is important and it is the tone we need to adopt to ensure we make the real progress that must be made in reducing emissions, ensuring the sustainability of the food produced in our agricultural system, supporting farmers to improve their incomes and continuing the extremely important and world-leading work they do in producing healthy, nutritious, safe and sustainable food.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly stated that nobody should be pointing the finger at or seeking to blame farmers. That is a really important starting point. We cannot say that often enough. There is no doubt we have learned a great deal. If we reflect back to ten years ago, I bet there were no debates in this Chamber on the issues of climate change, global warming or emissions.

Certainly, 20 or 30 years ago we did not have the same level of knowledge or understanding of the importance of our emissions profile, of how we conduct our daily lives, the actions we take and how we live with respect to the environment and the world around us or in the way we interact with our environment in terms of its importance to biodiversity. However, we have learned a great deal and we need to respond to that. We have also learned about the challenge we face not only as a nation but as a world and as citizens of Earth in collectively taking serious steps to reduce emissions and tackle global warming. That comes down to each of us individually, each sector of the economy and each industry, business and compartment of our national life. Importantly, that also applies to agriculture, particularly given that it is such a significant part of our national emissions profile. This is not because of anything specific to agriculture, although it can be very much tied to the fact we have a climate that is very conducive to good agriculture production. However, the main reason is that we do not have the same industrial sector as other developed countries, which means our agricultural profile makes up a higher proportion of our overall emissions. That sets us apart from many other European and developed countries, with New Zealand being the only country with which we are comparable in the percentage of the overall emissions profile that agriculture makes up. Naturally, in examining how we can reduce our emissions profile nationally, there will be significant discussion on agriculture, as well as other aspects of the economy, but agriculture will naturally comprise a big part of that discussion. Farmers and all those engaged in the food sector are willing to play their part. As a number of representatives and Senators have said today, no one more than farmers wants to ensure that the way they produce food and interact with the environment is in sync with the environment, promotes biodiversity and keeps emissions to a minimum. Also, central to that is animal welfare. Farmers are stepping up to the mark in that respect and have already contributed a significant amount.

In terms of how we move forward, it is important we all work together, that we co-operate regarding the plans we have put in place, that we listen, engage and educate one another, and that we put in place plans for how we go forward and make progress. That has been the approach the Government has taken. We have made massive strides in putting in place plans which will make a difference. The next challenge is to step forward with those and see results in the reduction in emissions from agriculture and right across the economy in the time ahead. If we reflect back to the 1960s or 1970s almost all Irish agriculture was organic and it was following that time chemical fertiliser became a tool. However, we have tools at our disposal that our forefathers, grandfathers and my father when he was a young did not have in terms of soil fertility and testing. There were more multi-species around then because it was there in the soil. Clover was really important. We have a good understanding of all of those things now and tools we did not necessarily have then. We are now seeing how farmers are adopting the different tools at their disposal.

There is significant emerging science, particularly regarding methane. Through Teagasc, we have invested in studies looking at how emerging science around feed additives can be applied at national level. There is significant potential in that respect. Studies are also looking at breeding. We have seen the progress made in the productivity of cows over the past two decades through genetic evaluation and the economic breeding index. That is applied to milk. Different animals have different emissions profiles with regard to methane. How do we programme that into genetic breeding and how do we go about making our breeding decisions to factor that to create lots of potential. The key point is that we must make our contribution to lowering the emissions profile.

That will also enhance the value of the food we produce because it will make it even more attractive to the people to whom we are selling it. Our markets across the world, which are widespread and cross the globe, have been built on the back of our sustainability credentials and the fact that we are a pasture, grass-based food-producing nation that is viewed as one of the most sustainable food producers in the world. The way we will maintain those markets is by becoming even more sustainable and verifying and showing that. The way we will add value and maximise profit for farmers and the food they produce is by becoming more sustainable and reducing the emissions footprint because it will ensure we continue to be a number one choice whenever consumers in Ireland or any other country go to consume food. That is the way we maximise the profits at farm level and add value to that.

We could all look to add more volume and see the value and margins reduce. The key issue is adding value to what we produce in the time ahead. The Food Vision 2030 strategy, which I published at the end of the summer, very much speaks to that sustainable food systems approach to our food production system. In taking that approach, Food Vision 2030 outlines how we can grow the value of our exports from €14 billion today to €21 billion by the end of the decade through taking that approach. That is very much the direction we need to travel and is complemented by the climate action plan. The targets in that plan are ambitious but deliverable. They will stretch us but we must all stretch ourselves. Every sector has to stretch itself.

The lower emissions target we received in agriculture is a reflection of the understanding, which was outlined in the programme for Government, that the Government needs to take into account the particular science around agriculture, its emissions profile and the economic and social importance of the sector. I believe the emissions target we have put in place is an appropriate one that respects that but will also challenge us. The challenge is to deliver on that in the time ahead.

Senator Dolan spoke about the need for hope in agriculture and to ensure there is a strong future for it. I concur with that. Senators Murphy, Lombard, Mullen and Maria Byrne spoke to this as well. There is a very strong future for our agriculture sector. People respect food more than they ever did. They respect how it is produced and its sustainability credentials. They are increasingly conscious of what they put into their bodies and will want to be assured not just that it is safe and nutritious but that it is sustainable. That is going to be very important for us to keep our place on their plates.

I see Ireland building on the tremendous starting point we have because we will deepen the credentials we have, add value to them in the process and continue to be a food-producing nation that is respected, valued and sought after across the world. In doing so, we will ensure that the place of the primary producers in the food system is strengthened in the process and maintain a strong agriculture sector in the time ahead. I thank Members for the spirit in which this debate was held and look forward to us going forward together in the same manner, making real progress, strengthening our sector and making it more sustainable in the process.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response to the debate.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ag 6.35 p.m. go dtí 10.30 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 26 Eanáir 2022.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.35 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 26 January 2022.