



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 27 Eanáir 2022

Thursday, 27 January 2022

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

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

The need for the Minister for the Environment, Climate Action and Communications to make a statement on the development of a green hydrogen industry in Ireland.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the provision of additional bed units at Sacred Heart Hospital, County Roscommon, and Portiuncula Hospital, Ballynasloe, County Galway.

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

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

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on the remit, status and funding of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

I have also received notice from Senator Rónán Mullen of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the procurement process undertaken for the appointment of an independent chair of the review of the operation of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018.

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

The need for the Minister for Foreign Affairs to make a statement on the findings of

the Operation Greenwich report published by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland earlier this month.

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

The need for the Minister for the Environment, Climate Action and Communications to make a statement on the deposit return scheme.

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

The need for the Minister of State with responsibility for public health, well-being and the national drugs strategy to make a statement on the need to add nitrous oxide to the statutory list of controlled substances.

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

The need for the Minister for Transport to provide support and funding for the maintenance and rehabilitation of Dublin harbours, in particular Dún Laoghaire, Bulloch and Colliemore harbours.

Of the matters raised by the Senators suitable for discussion, I have selected those raised by Senators O'Reilly, Murphy, Kyne and Boyhan and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Energy Policy

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank the Cathaoirleach for accepting this matter for discussion. It relates to a very pertinent contemporary issue, and I appreciate the fact that he recognises this. I thank the Minister of State for being here to answer questions on it to inform the House of any developments.

We can be thankful that the debate on the science of climate change is effectively over. There are very few naysayers left. It is now a matter of implementing solutions and deciding how to address the problem. To be technical, there is what is called blue hydrogen and there is green hydrogen. Green hydrogen has potential as an energy supply that involves no carbon emissions. It could be very productive in that regard. It was recently recognised at a very high level in a speech by an Taoiseach at a meeting of the shared island forum held in Dublin Castle on 9 December 2021 when he said:

We will [...] work to develop with [...] the UK Government a cross-border pilot project on green hydrogen for the road network. We stand ready to resource an agreed project

That commitment was made. Will the Minister of State tell me what steps have been taken in that regard?

The main source for what I will say here is a report commissioned by Green Tech Skillnet in partnership with Wind Energy Ireland and Skillnet Ireland. That report forms the basis of my comments today. It says that long-term strategies for the use of green hydrogen have been developed in jurisdictions as diverse as Canada, Chile, Colombia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, the UK and the EU and notes that, following COP26, green hydrogen targets in these regions were raised. The background is that this is a live issue that needs to be advanced.

The main possible source of green hydrogen in this country is wind turbines. Our domestic wind turbines, which are mainly on-land wind turbines, are not enough. We need to take advantage of the great potential for offshore wind turbines, particularly off the south-west coast. We have some of the greatest potential in Europe in this regard. There should be a surplus of wind energy. We should ultimately be able to supply the domestic market while also having the potential for exports, according to this report.

There is a definite role for green hydrogen in meeting Ireland's energy needs. The report tells us we now have the technology to utilise it and the economic and political will is there. It is, of course, easier for the larger industrial countries but green hydrogen could potentially be used for power generation here in, for example, Moneypoint or Whitegate. It could also be used as aviation fuel or shipping fuel. There is also the potential to export it. Ultimately, it will be possible to use it in lorries. Injecting a blend including 20% green hydrogen into the national gas pipelines is technically achievable. That is something we should be doing. We need to get a pilot project up and running in order to collect evidence. I am running out of time but those are some of the main issues. I will come back in with some figures at the end. In essence, I want the Minister of State to tell me where we are with regard to moving towards green hydrogen and creating the *modus operandi* in that regard. Where do we stand and where do we plan to go? What steps are being taken?

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I thank the Senator for raising this important matter, which is of great interest to me. Scenarios for net zero emissions by 2050 include a potentially significant role for the use of zero-emission gases, including green hydrogen. In planning for the longer term, we will ensure that they can meet their potential.

The Climate Action Plan 2021, published in November, identifies green hydrogen as having the potential to support decarbonisation across several sectors, including: high-temperature heat for industry; transport, including aviation and marine fuels and some limited heavy and long-haul ground transport; and, in Ireland, for long-duration electricity storage. The Climate Action Plan 2021 already includes actions relating to green hydrogen in the electricity, enterprise and transport sectors. It also sets out how green hydrogen could address some of the challenges faced by the energy sector, such as providing a backup for intermittent renewables. A key target set out in the climate action plan is to carry out a work programme to identify a route to deliver 1 terawatt-hour, TWh, to 3 TWh of zero-emissions gas, including green hydrogen, by 2030.

It is the intention of the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to publish a consultation on the development of a green hydrogen strategy in the first half of this year. As part of this strategy, the Department will first look at the areas of demand where we think green hydrogen will be necessary, competitive and efficient and where better alternatives do not exist. Displacing fossil fuel-derived hydrogen in industry would be a clear and sensible use of green hydrogen. We will not look to incentivise green hydrogen in areas where direct electrification or efficiency would be better

solutions. As an example of this, direct hydrogen gas heating would require five to seven times more renewable electricity than a heat pump.

We will also look at supply of green hydrogen, identifying the potential for both dedicated hydrogen production from renewable electricity, but also using curtailed energy from grid electricity. There is a need to rapidly develop green electricity to displace fossil electricity first. However, there may be areas where, through constraints on the grid, green hydrogen may be a more efficient route to decarbonisation of our energy use without the need for additional grid infrastructure.

There are several companies already looking at this opportunity in the midlands and the west. I welcome the recent publication of Wind Energy Ireland's report, compiled in conjunction with Green Tech Skillnet, on green hydrogen. I also welcome the support of Sinn Féin and its Private Members' Bill on the development of a hydrogen strategy for Ireland.

The climate action plan is a living document and will be updated on an annual basis to reflect ongoing developments and targets achieved. My Department continues to work with the relevant Departments, agencies and stakeholders to carry out research and develop policies to support the uptake of green hydrogen. I expect a strategy focusing on the development of green hydrogen to be included in the climate action plan 2022. An extensive public consultation process was undertaken as part of the development of the Climate Action Plan 2021. In the future there will be ongoing dialogue with citizens and stakeholders, including public consultation.

In the context of the transport sector, a very important aspect of green hydrogen is its potential to support the decarbonisation of transport. It is envisaged that green hydrogen can contribute to the decarbonisation of those hard-to-abate sectors, such as those relating to heavy goods vehicles, HGVs, shipping and, potentially, as a synthetic fuel, aviation during the second half of this decade. It also has the potential to be used in the manufacture of synthetic fuels for transport. I am very keen to see Ireland, as an island, lead with decarbonising aviation. We have a significant aviation leasing sector, and I was happy to see its report published recently on the decarbonisation of air travel. It realises that there is a significant risk of stranded aviation assets if it is not at the forefront of decarbonisation.

As part of the renewable fuels for transport policy statement that was published in November of last year, the Minister for Transport announced that from 2023, subject to legislation, renewable fuels of non-biological origin, such as green hydrogen and synthetic fuels produced from it, will be eligible for credits as part of the renewable fuels obligation scheme. Further, in recognition of the need to incentivise their development, they will be awarded multiple credits. Also, under the shared island dialogues, the Department of Transport, together with the Department of the Taoiseach, is progressing projects that will explore the topic of safety regulation for hydrogen as a transport fuel and they will set out a roadmap for the installation of hydrogen refuelling infrastructure servicing travel between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

In addition, the Department of Transport is supporting green hydrogen development through the provision of policy advice for projects looking at the development of green hydrogen infrastructure, such as the Galway green hydrogen hub and Hydrogen Mobility Ireland projects. It is also supporting it through the introduction of the alternatively fuelled heavy-duty vehicle grant in March 2021 and through working with the Minister for Finance to announce, in budget 2022, the expansion of accelerated capital allowance scheme for natural gas-propelled vehicles and related equipment to include hydrogen vehicles and equipment.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for that response. It is a very positive and encouraging response because one of the things people outside this building will be wondering about is where the action is. The Minister of State indicated that the Minister has committed to publishing a consultation on the development of a green hydrogen strategy in the first half of this year. He also stated that as part of this strategy the Department will look at areas of demand where we think green hydrogen will be necessary, competitive and efficient. The Minister of State further noted that there are several companies already looking to take up this opportunity in the midlands and the west. I humbly suggest that contact be maintained with those companies and that they be kept on the pitch in order that they will continue with their work in this area.

The report we both cited is very encouraging. I take the point that the big thing is to increase the amount of wind energy being produced. Will the Minister of State comment on the offshore wind energy element?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: In a very concrete way, three buses have been put in place and are operating. They are giving us the experience of knowing what it is like to run longer heavy-duty services. Of course, they do not give rise to pollution or emissions. When hydrogen is burned, all one gets is water. Therefore, it is a very clean fuel. That is giving us some experience.

Hydrogen can be used for all these different things but it will not be commercially appropriate in every sector. In fact, we can make a hierarchy of least appropriate to most appropriate. Electricity is something that can be generated but it is very hard to store. Hydrogen gives the ability to take when in excess and then use it when in deficit. It allows us to balance the variability of wind. If it is a very windy day and we cannot use all the electricity being generated, it can be stored somewhere until we can reuse it. In some of the hard-to-decarbonise sectors, such as long-distance shipping, aviation and heavy trucking, there is a great deal of potential, even if it is not ideal. For example, for heating a home, it appears that direct hydrogen gas heating is not likely to replace natural gas. As a result, we will be looking at the use of heat pumps instead.

There is an EU hydrogen strategy, which means that this matter is being talked about in Europe as well. The strategy was published in 2020 and it comes with an important new legislative package for hydrogen and decarbonisation. That was completed in December 2021. These two initiatives seek to create the conditions for a shift from natural gas to renewable and low-carbon gases and, in particular, hydrogen and biomethane. We have a very undeveloped biomethane sector in Ireland in comparison with Germany. There is a great deal of room there for what are considered to be alternative gases that do not involve as many climate change aspects and that give rise to much reduced pollution.

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

An Cathaoirleach: I am delighted to welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan.

Senator Eugene Murphy: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach as an ábhar seo a chur ar an gclár oibre inniu. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit go dtí an Teach. I wish to speak briefly today about two very important projects in the Galway-Roscommon region in relation to our health service. One is the building that is now being built at Portiuncula Hospital. If I am not mistaken, it received planning permission in 2017. The building is badly needed for patient

accommodation.

The second project is at the Sacred Heart Hospital in Roscommon. The Minister of State has often spoken up for it. The hospital has been an important part of our health services for many years. The Government has given the go-ahead for a 50-bed unit there.

I will once again pay tribute to the staff of both hospitals. We must acknowledge that hospitals must still be alert and careful because Covid can, unfortunately, come and go. I hope that it is coming to an end.

I am asking for an update on both projects. I understand that the deadline for opening at Portiuncula Hospital in Ballinasloe is mid-summer. Is it on schedule? Planning permission has been extended. Once completed, will there be a quick opening date? The Minister of State and I will accept that the hospital's staff have been working in terrible conditions. In that regard, I express my thanks to the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, the Minister of State, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, who visited us and pushed this project on when he was the Minister for Health, and the Minister of State with responsibility for older people, Deputy Butler. Without doubt, their support has been vital.

Considerable work has been done on the Sacred Heart Hospital project. I acknowledge not only the Government's support for the project in this year's budget, but the Minister of State's support through the years. I understand that a planning application for the project was to be submitted to Roscommon County Council in December but it has not arrived. I have no reason to believe there is any problem or that the project has been delayed. It may just be a matter of Covid holding things up. I look forward to the planning application being put before Roscommon County Council in the near future.

Clarification on these two projects would be welcome. I thank the Minister of State for attending the House to deal with my queries.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Senator for raising this issue and giving me the opportunity to outline to the House the position on capital commitments at Portiuncula Hospital in Ballinasloe and Sacred Heart Hospital in Roscommon.

Portiuncula Hospital is an acute general and maternity hospital that delivers a patient-centred, quality-driven and quality-focused service and provides a wide range of diagnostic and support services. The hospital's catchment area includes patients residing in east Galway, Roscommon, the midlands and the mid-west.

The construction of the 50-bed ward block is an important project for the hospital and will deliver replacement accommodation in line with current standards. A contractor was appointed for the enabling works contract and work commenced on 11 August 2020. The enabling works project was completed in May 2021 and dealt with a number of legacy issues as well as preparing for the 50-bed project. As part of these works, the entire electrical and natural gas network has been upgraded and the medical gas infrastructure has been modified and upgraded. Tender documents for the 50-bed ward block project have been issued to the shortlisted contractors and were returned in December 2021. It is intended that the contract for this development will be awarded in quarter 1 of 2022.

The HSE's capital programme provides for the construction of a 50-bed long-stay facility at the Sacred Heart Hospital in Roscommon. The Government's overarching policy objective is to support our older population in living in dignity and independence in their own homes and communities for as long as possible. The standard of care delivered to residents in public units is generally very high, but we recognise that many of our community hospitals are housed in buildings that are less than ideal in the modern context. Without them, though, many older people would not have access to the care they need. It is important, therefore, that we upgrade our public bed stock. This is the aim of the capital investment programme for community nursing units.

The Sacred Heart Hospital is currently a 95-bed older persons care home and rehabilitation hospital situated in Roscommon town. It provides 80 older persons' long-term care beds and 15 short-term palliative, rehabilitation and respite care beds. The development of the new 50-bed long-stay facility is at detailed design stage. The project's design process has commenced and will take approximately 12 months to complete, including securing planning permission for the development. At that point, the project can move to the next stage of the public spending code. All capital development proposals must progress through a number of approval stages in line with the public spending code. The delivery of capital projects is a dynamic process and is subject to the successful completion of the various approval stages, which can impact the timeline for delivery.

Senator Eugene Murphy: That was a positive response on the crucial developments at Portiuncula Hospital and Sacred Heart Hospital. I was delighted to hear the Minister of State say that, as part of the works on the former, the electrical and natural gas network had been upgraded and the medical gas infrastructure had been modified and upgraded.

I hope that we can move the project at Sacred Heart Hospital ahead as quickly as possible. I expect the planning application to be before Roscommon County Council shortly, after which it will be full steam ahead.

I pay tribute to all the staff at both hospitals. I also pay tribute to the HSE staff who are bringing these projects forward. We have had many meetings, some arguments and lots of discussion, but both projects are proceeding well. It is important that we get them in place as quickly as possible.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: As the Senator knows, the Government is committed to ensuring that Portiuncula Hospital can continue to deliver patient-centred, quality-driven and quality-focused service and provide a wide range of diagnostic and support services to meet the needs of its catchment area. The construction of the 50-bed ward is good news for the people of east Galway, Roscommon, the midlands and the mid-west.

Strategic reform in the model of delivery of care for older people is under way in pursuit of the policy goal of supporting older people in living independently in their own homes and communities for longer. Community nursing units will continue to play a vital part in an overall continuum of care for older people over the coming years as our older population increases in line with demographic trends. The continued implementation of the community nursing unit programme, including the 50-bed long-stay facility at Sacred Heart Hospital in Roscommon, will contribute to achieving that.

I thank the staff at the two hospitals for their great work and I thank the Senator for raising

this very important issue.

Emergency Departments

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank the Cathaoirleach for choosing this important Commencement matter for debate. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan. I have raised this matter a number of times in the past 18 months. This is probably the third or fourth time the Minister of State has been before me. The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, has appeared before me as well, but I have yet to meet the senior Minister in the Chamber to discuss this matter of importance to Galway and the wider west.

As the Minister of State has pointed out previously, a temporary emergency department is under construction. The situation is confusing because some people believe that
11 o'clock it is actually the new emergency department. It is not, of course. I am told that phase 1 is scheduled for handover in April and the internal replanned area will be handed over in July. Thereafter, a planning application for the permanent emergency department will be progressed.

This situation has been ongoing for a number of years. A welcome decision was made that the new building would include full paediatric and maternity services as well as the emergency department. That was a positive move.

While there have been internal and decanting works in respect of the temporary emergency department, the planning application for the emergency department has still not been lodged. I do not see why that cannot be done in conjunction with the work that is going on but instead, it seems that Saolta University Health Care Group must wait for the works to be completed.

I know that there is a process regarding the public spending code. I ask the Minister of State to confirm if that is being assessed. Has it been completed or is it with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform or the HSE estates national unit at the moment? I ask all that because it is important that that is confirmed, that permission is granted and that Saolta can progress to the lodging of the planning application.

As I have said on numerous occasions, nothing can be built without planning permission. It does not matter what the project is; planning permission must be granted. In this case, Saolta University Health Care Group has not lodged its planning application for a new emergency department in University Hospital Galway. This is vitally important.

The staff in the emergency department do Trojan work day in and day out. Also, the number of people on trolleys varies. Sometimes the hospital has the highest number of people on trolleys in the country, as it had for a long period last autumn, and other times it has the second highest numbers. That is not good enough for patients, staff or those who want to visit their loved ones. Obviously, people could not visit their loved ones during Covid periods or visiting opportunities were limited but things are getting back to normal now and it is not good enough for anybody that such a situation remains.

We need to give hope to people that an emergency department is definitely on its way. The most important stages are the lodging and granting of the planning application. We will still have a long way to go in terms of tenders, construction contracts and all that. I seek confirma-

tion from the Minister of State on timelines, the next stages of the project and when a planning application will be lodged by Saolta University Health Care Group for an emergency department for University Hospital Galway, which is a centre of excellence for the region. I hope that he can provide some information on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and that he will confirm dates and a timeline for this vital project.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank Senator Kyne for raising this issue and giving me the opportunity again to outline to the House the position regarding the new emergency department at University Hospital Galway. I will also convey his concerns to the Minister.

University Hospital Galway provides regional services for a wide range of specialties. It serves a catchment area in the region of 1 million people along the west from Donegal to north Tipperary. University Hospital Galway is a model 4 hospital that provides 24-7 acute surgery, acute medicine and critical care. This project for a new emergency department at University Hospital Galway, which is part of a larger development incorporating maternity and paediatric services, is included in the HSE's capital programme.

Approval was granted to complete a temporary extension to the emergency department, ED, to provide additional accommodation. This includes segregated waiting areas, segregated treatment areas, isolation rooms, additional resuscitation spaces and additional support accommodation to take account of requirements to treat Covid-19 patients, as well as improved infection control and prevention requirements for the ED.

The temporary emergency department extension building will be single-storey and have a rooftop plant room. It will be connected to the main hospital block at the existing emergency department entrance. This project is expected to be completed in early 2022. The temporary emergency department project and associated works will also serve as an enabling works project for the proposed permanent emergency department by helping to free up the site required for the proposed new block.

The main emergency department and women's and children's block development at University Hospital Galway is a complex project and is in the early stages of design progression. The project is of significant scale and must progress through the stages outlined in the public spending code. The full accommodation scope for the entire development has been agreed following an internal HSE review and it is proposed to progress the full block as one single project.

There is no date yet for the planning application for the main building as the project is still proceeding through the initial stages of the public spending code. There are several enabling works projects to be completed on site before the main building can go ahead. On that basis, the design team has had pre-planning meetings with the local authority on two of these enabling works projects. The preliminary business case is under review with the HSE and pending board approval.

All capital development proposals, as Senators know, must progress through a number of approval stages, in line with the public spending code. The delivery of capital projects is a dynamic process and is subject to the successful completion of the various approval stages, which can impact the timeline for delivery.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister of State for that response. I am afraid that it sounds like the project is going backwards as he referred to the "initial stages of the public spending code". There is still no date for the planning application to be lodged and the Minister

of State referred to works that must be completed before the main building can go ahead. We know that the site must be cleared before a building can be built but a building cannot be built unless we get planning permission and we cannot get planning permission unless a planning application is lodged. It seems that this project is going backwards. The month of handover has not been confirmed. That was supposed to happen in April and it is now early 2022. When will the handover happen?

There are no timelines for this project that is of such vital importance to the people of Galway and the region and that is an absolutely frustrating situation for staff. I have heard reports that emergency department staff have resigned due to the pressures of their job and the Minister of State's reply is not going to lift their spirits or those of anyone else. The people of Galway deserve a lot better than the information that has been provided here.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I will convey Senator Kyne's concerns to the Minister, the Department and the HSE. As he knows, the project is of a huge scale and it is progressing through the stages outlined in the public spending code. The preliminary business case, as I said, is under review with the HSE and pending board approval. I hope that we will get board approval as quickly as possible.

This project is part of a larger development that incorporates maternity and paediatric services. It is included in the HSE capital programme. In advance of permanent arrangements, approval was granted to complete a temporary extension to the emergency department to provide additional accommodation, which is expected to be completed in early 2022.

The main emergency department and women's and children's block development at University Hospital Galway is, as the Senator said, a complex project and it is in the early stages of design progression. While there is no date yet for the planning application for the main building, the HSE is actively engaging with the local authority as the project proceeds through the initial stages of the public spending code. Again, I will convey the concerns of the Senator to the Minister and the Department of Health to see can we get all of the various stakeholders to progress the project as quickly as possible because the Senator has articulately raised his concerns. The Senator has been in here many times trying to push on the project and I hope that we will push it as quickly as possible.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Eugene Murphy): I thank the Minister of State and Senator Kyne. I know that this project is important to all who live in the western region.

National Parks and Wildlife Service

Acting Chairperson (Senator Eugene Murphy): I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Noonan.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister of State for coming here directly. He is very conscious and proud of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, as am I, and I thank him for taking time out of his busy schedule to deal with this matter.

I want to put a few points about the National Parks and Wildlife Service on the public record. I believe that it is always important to set the scene for the people looking in at these proceedings because when we are in here, we sometimes talk in a bubble. The role of the National

Parks and Wildlife Service is to secure the conservation of a representative range of ecosystems, and to maintain and enhance the populations of flora and fauna in Ireland. According to the NPWS website, it is also “to designate and advise on the protection of habitats and species identified for nature conservation”, including natural heritage areas, special areas of conservation and special protection areas, “having particular regard to the need to consult with interested parties”. It is also responsible for making “the necessary arrangements for the implementation of National and EU legislation and policies for nature conservation and biodiversity including the EU Habitats and Birds Directives, and for the ratification and implementation of the range of international Conventions and Agreements relating to the natural heritage.” Its role is also to “manage, maintain and develop State-owned National Parks and Nature Reserves” and “promote awareness of natural heritage and biodiversity issues through education, outreach to schools and engaging with stakeholders”. I have set out that framework. I am sure the Minister of State knows it well. As I said at the outset, he is very proud of the NPWS. I, too, am very proud of it. It is an extraordinary organisation.

However, I am also conscious that it needs resources and practical support. It has a huge role in education. I did not touch on the point to any great extent, but the organisation does amazing work with schools in outreach and education. I want to acknowledge that important work. An article was published in *The Sunday Times* on 13 December 2021. I do not believe everything I read in every newspaper, but I will quote from the article. It states: “An unpublished government report on the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has found it is unable to fulfil its current obligations due to limited resources and ‘major’ structural problems.” It continues: “The highly critical report was commissioned by Malcolm Noonan, the Green party minister for heritage, under a commitment in the programme for government to review the nature protection agency’s remit, status and funding to ensure it was playing an ‘effective role’.” The Government made a commitment to review the agency’s remit. That is fantastic. The article suggests that there are serious issues regarding funding and the agency’s capacity to carry out its functions and work. I will not mention the names of people who may or may not be on the committee, because that is hearsay. I am not privy to that information.

In essence, what I am saying is that it is in our interest that we have a good, well-resourced NPWS. I know the Minister of State is committed to that. However, when members of the public read articles such as those published in *The Sunday Times*, they are concerned. I understand that a 114-page report is sitting on the Minister of State’s desk. It has been suggested to me that it makes certain recommendations and sets alarm bells ringing regarding a number of issues I have raised. Perhaps the Minister of State can touch on some of the contents of the report, if it is appropriate to do so. However, there is no pressure, because there are processes and consultations that the Minister of State has to go through. I fully understand and respect that. Perhaps sometime in the future the Minister of State can bring that report, or the key recommendations from it, to us. I ask the Minister of State to respond to some of the issues I have raised.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I thank the Senator for raising this Commencement matter. I will try to outline the trajectory in terms of the report referenced in *The Sunday Times* and where it fits into the bigger piece of work that we have been doing over recent months. My portfolio as Minister of State with responsibility for heritage and electoral reform is an expansive one. The top priority for me on becoming Minister of State was to restore heritage funding, placing nature, heritage and biodiversity at the heart of what this Government does well, taking a whole-of-government approach.

As the Senator has outlined, the NPWS is a crucial service that is mandated with the protection, conservation and presentation of our natural heritage, including the variety of birds, mammals, invertebrates, fungi and plants that combine in the dynamic ecosystems that give us vital services that society and the economy depend on, such as soil fertility, water purification, carbon sequestration and storage and, of course, that sense of peace and wonder that so many of us enjoy when we experience nature. In 2019, we learned that globally many of our protected habitats were of poor or inadequate status and that almost half were declining. That same year, the Dáil declared a climate and biodiversity emergency. At that time NPWS resourcing was not sufficient to address the challenge that lay ahead with the level of urgency that was required.

I determined that a hallmark of my tenure as Minister of State would be to leave a positive legacy for biodiversity in Ireland, to deliver on the Government's unprecedented ambition for nature and to respond comprehensively to the programme for Government commitment to strengthen the NPWS, improve its effectiveness and make it the voice for nature that we need it to be. The primary determinant in all of that is resourcing. I secured additional moneys in the 2020 July stimulus, significantly increased NPWS funding by almost 50% in budget 2021 and, in October 2021, as part of the budget, announced that NPWS funding would increase yet again to over €47 million in 2022, a total increase of 64% since I became Minister of State. That brought it back up to pre-financial crisis levels in terms of staffing and resources.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I will be brief. I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response, which I will consider later. What jumps off the page, and what I want to congratulate the Minister of State on, is the 64% increase in funding for the NPWS since he became Minister of State, and his absolute commitment to keep the NPWS focused. I am also particularly interested to learn today, because it is news to me, of the establishment of the wildlife crime unit, a cohort of new conservation rangers and the recruitment of ecological and scientific experts, field staff and additional administrative staff. That is really positive.

I note the Minister of State's commitment in terms of the review, reflect, renew strategic action plan. That is also welcome. It is very positive to hear that the Minister of State is working closely with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and his colleagues and that we will have the strategic action plan for the future of the NPWS. I thank the Minister of State for that and for his stewardship and ongoing engagement. It is great when one has a personal interest and a hobby as well as a political vision and mission. I wish the Minister of State well and thank him.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I thank the Senator for such positive comments. As I said, it was our intention to try to get the strategic plan for the future of the NPWS to Cabinet towards the middle or end of February. We know it has been an expansive piece of work. It has taken us longer than expected, but I think it will be worth it.

I wish to reiterate the comments the Senator made about the NPWS as an organisation. Since I was appointed, I have visited all of our national parks. It is down to the general operatives, the district conservation officers. The teams on the ground are made up of phenomenal people who are doing incredible work. They have carried this work out through Covid because our parks and nature reserves have been open during that time.

The resourcing element that the Senator spoke about is important. I do not think it is enough; it needs to go further. We have a huge ambition for nature over the next decade and beyond. In that regard, I am encouraged by the work we have done to date. I am thankful to people for

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their patience, because I know it has taken longer than expected. I am also very grateful to the Senator for raising this Commencement matter. It is important to outline the timeline for this work and how it moves forward. When we deliver the plan to Cabinet, the next phase will be the serious phase around its implementation. It will require additional resources and a collective effort across government. I thank the Senator for raising the matter.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Eugene Murphy): That was a most interesting discussion. I thank the Minister of State and the Senator. I also wish to thank the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, and the other Senators involved in the Commencement matters. As always, I thank the staff.

Sitting suspended at 11.20 a.m. and resumed at 11.30 a.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Regina Doherty: The Order of Business is No. 1, Garda Síochána (Functions and Operational Areas) Bill 2021 - Second Stage, to be taken at 1 p.m. and to adjourn at 2 p.m., with the opening contribution of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed seven minutes, and all other Senators not to exceed five minutes; No. 2, Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person (Amendment) (Stalking) Bill 2021 - Committee Stage, to be taken at 2 p.m. and the proceedings thereon shall if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 3 p.m. by the putting of one question from the Chair, which shall in relation to amendments include only those set down or accepted by the Government; and No. 3, statements on violence against women.

An Cathaoirleach: In regard to the arrangement for the statements on violence against women, is it to be taken at 3 p.m. and to-----

Senator Regina Doherty: It will conclude when it concludes. It will be taken at 3 p.m. with the opening contribution of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, the contribution of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes, and the Minister to be given not less than ten minutes to reply to the debate.

An Cathaoirleach: I call Senator Chambers.

Senator Lisa Chambers: The Leader will be aware, as will other Members, that recently the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, announced that there would be a new scheme in place for childcare in this country and the Government has announced core funding for the childcare sector. The Minister is due to publish specific guidelines for the sector that private and public providers will be required to engage with in order to receive this core funding. I understand the Minister is working on this. I respectfully ask that at the earliest opportunity, when he is in a position to update the House, we request a date for a discussion with him on this core funding and the provision of childcare.

The second issue I wish to raise is endometriosis and the ongoing difficulties many thousands of women in this country face. Members may have heard the ongoing discussion on

Newstalk that began last week with my sister, Ciara, and went on for almost seven days with women ringing in. It started a national conversation on this horrific condition that is not curable but is manageable if there is early intervention. Last year we had the announcement of the first specialist clinic in Tallaght, which was welcome, but we are just scratching the surface. Many women in Ireland continue to travel for much-needed surgery to the UK and further afield because they cannot get the specialist care that they need here. Women still wait a very long time to get properly diagnosed. It is on average nine years. As I said, early intervention is key as the longer this disease is left unchecked, the more havoc it wreaks inside. There is a need for a comprehensive education programme at primary and secondary school levels, as happens in other countries. I will speak to the example of New Zealand, where the menstrual education, ME, programme has been rolled out across schools and has been very effective. They have reduced their diagnosis times because they have educated young women and girls as to what is normal and what is not in terms of menstrual and reproductive health in order that women are empowered to ask the right questions, to seek the care they need and to demand that they get the treatment they so deserve. I request that at the earliest opportunity we invite the Minister for Health to this Chamber to have a specific discussion on the whole area of endometriosis, the care pathway, the treatment available, the diagnosis time and the education.

I request also statements with the Minister for Education because both Departments will have to work together on this. It is not just under the remit of the Minister for Health. It is an important topic. It is one of those many women's health issues that have gone unspoken of for generations because women were told it was just part of being a woman, you are one of the unlucky ones, just get on with it. We now know that is not true. We have a long way to go to educate young girls and women because much damage has been done over the years.

Senator Seán Kyne: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach. Luaigh mé anuraidh na deiseanna agus na buntáistí a bhaineann le calafort domhainmhara nua i Ros a Mhíl i gConamara. Tá caipiteal faighte ag an gcoiste stiúrtha don chalafort nua agus táimid Green Investment Group, GIG Macquarie ag súil le dul chun cinn go luath maidir le maoiniú don togra. Tá pleananna ag GIG McQuarry chun feirm ghaoithe a thógáil cois cósta ag Na Clocha Sceirde i gConamara agus tuigimid go léir an tábhacht a bhaineann le fuinneamh in-athnuaite agus na deiseanna a chruthaíonn sé.

There has been a planning application for a new deepwater harbour at Rossaveal in Connamara for some years. This has been debated in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in terms of getting it on a list for funding. In 2020 the Sceirde Rocks development for a wind farm proximate to the Rossaveal Harbour received special relevant status from the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. This is a game-changer in terms of the development of wind energy off the west coast. Obviously, a new deepwater harbour at Rossaveal would act as an incentive to develop that wind farm project and could be used in connection with the maintenance and development of the wind farm, both during and after construction. I have asked that this project be progressed and I hope the Minister can deliver funding for the project in the very near future.

This week representatives from the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, and the Irish College of General Practitioners, ICGP, came before the Joint Committee on Health on GP services. As we know, GPs are at the front line of healthcare in this country and certainly with Sláintecare in development, the primary care medical networks and GPs will play a leading role in preventative medicine and health treatment. There are some 3,500 GPs in the country and, clearly, as the population grows, the number of GPs will need to grow. As it stands, we are already well

below the number of GPs per head of population in the UK. Some rural areas have no doctors. Some urban areas are under huge pressure with doctors not taking on new clients. I asked how a new GP just out of training sets up a practice in a growing urban area. It seems the biggest impediment is the cost of establishment, or the set-up cost. Assistance is needed in that regard. I ask that we have a debate with the Minister for Health on GP services and the impediments to increasing the number of GPs required in both urban and rural areas to provide necessary health treatment and preventive services.

Senator Michael McDowell: I endorse what Senator Chambers said about women's menstrual health. I want to raise another issue on which she may agree with me. The state of the Defence Forces in Ireland has been run down deliberately and systematically by Government after Government to the point where they are no longer fit for purpose. The Reserve Defence Force, formerly Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil, FCÁ, has effectively been contracted to nothing. It is a shadow of its former self, just as the Garda Reserve was simply binned because it was inconvenient. The Defence Forces are now reduced to between 8,000 and 9,000 personnel across three services. We have ships out of commission because there are no crews to man them. It is a laugh to think that we are worried about the Russians when we cannot even put our small Naval Service out to sea in any circumstance in its entirety at the moment. This is a scandal.

Yesterday the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, the leader of the Green Party, announced that Cathal Brugha Barracks in Rathmines is to be bulldozed, as the newspaper said, to make way for social and affordable housing. I do not want to comment on whether that is a good or bad idea because I have not yet seen the proposal, and I welcome social and affordable housing close to the city in Dublin 6, where it is badly needed, but the proposal means the Defence Forces in Dublin, where 1.2 million people live, will now have one facility only, that is, McKee Barracks. That is the last barracks they are to have. It is an antiquated, Victorian or Edwardian structure used for the equitation school and other purposes. It also means the only facility next to or near Dublin will be the Curragh. The Defence Forces are shrinking under our very noses. If we are to remain outside NATO — I believe we should — we have a responsibility to give to the Government of Ireland, for the time being, what the Defence Forces have always been: the ultimate means to exert executive, governmental and democratic authority against any internal threat, terrorist event or external threat, within its capacity.

The process of shrinking the Defence Forces has gone beyond what is acceptable, as has the shrinking of the Reserve Defence Force role. It is the same as with the Garda Reserve. This is laziness. I am not making a personal point in saying that if we are to vest in one person the power to run the Defence Forces and the Department of Foreign Affairs, we should realise that the Defence Forces do not have any real voice at Cabinet. The time has come for that to be reversed. The reason I say all this is because I want a debate on the subject in this House.

Senator Paul Gavan: I wish to raise two issues. The first is that while many are concerned about the ongoing international difficulties and challenges concerning Russia, Ukraine and the build up of forces across the NATO region and the east, I really hope our Government is playing a constructive role in trying to de-escalate the tension. The more arms and munitions that are being ferried by both sides, the more likely it is that there will be a conflict. We have a seat at the United Nations that I really hope we are using constructively to ensure the continuation of dialogue. We all know that war would be an absolute disaster.

If we really want to respect the idea of the sovereignty of states and the view that one state

should not invade another, we need to address the elephant in the room, which is that, over the past 20 years, the Departments responsible for foreign affairs and transport have approved the refuelling of an estimated 15,000 US military-associated aircraft at Shannon Airport, the transportation through it of more than 3 million armed US soldiers, and the transportation of an unknown quantity of munitions to and from illegal wars in the Middle East that have cost the lives of millions of people. Those are absolute facts. If we are serious about building a more peaceful world, we have to address what is happening in Shannon. We cannot ignore the fact that planes are taking off today with US personnel and munitions. They are not heading off on a pleasure tour of the world. We know the horrendous damage that has been done by US wars — illegal wars — across the Middle East. How many people have died? Is it 1 million at this point? We are helping to facilitate that still.

Senator Seán Kyne: If they are going to Ukraine, is that not okay? Would the Senator object to that?

Senator Paul Gavan: Of course I would object to it. Absolutely.

Senator Seán Kyne: They are going-----

Senator Paul Gavan: I believe Ireland should be a neutral country. I am proud to support our neutrality.

An Cathaoirleach: If a Senator wants to intervene, he or she must follow Standing Orders.

Senator Paul Gavan: I want to finish this week on a positive note. The Leader may recall the distressing story of a Pakistani national facing homelessness at Christmas. I wrote to Kilkenny County Council on the back of it. The man in question had undergone a horrific experience of human trafficking. He was living in a stable and was being treated by a vet for three years. It is a horrific story. Kilkenny County Council did write back and responded very positively to me. It took the initiative, working with Migrant Rights Centre Ireland and the Immigrant Council of Ireland, to ensure the man was not homeless at Christmas. In fairness to the council, it did write and deal with the case appropriately. It acknowledged that providing an emergency bed and hostel facility in Kilkenny would in no way allow a person without legal status in the country to exit homelessness, secure supports or become financially self-sufficient, but it ensured the man was not left on the streets of Kilkenny. It liaised with the relevant organisations. I am glad to state the man has accommodation in Dublin while applying, with the Garda, to be recognised as a victim of human trafficking. We have to have a separate conversation on human trafficking, but I want to recognise today that Kilkenny County Council, in fairness to it, responded positively and in the right way.

Senator Marie Sherlock: The Labour Party very much supports Senator Chambers's call for a debate on what is being put in place for those in this country who suffer from endometriosis. As we know, it is a silent disease and imposes such a cost on young women in respect of their education and family and social life, in addition to so much else.

The issue I want to raise this morning relates to a discussion that has been going on for several days. It concerns the right to flexible work or to request flexible leave. At the weekend, we called for the right to flexible work because it is crucial to take account of the work arrangements that have evolved over the past two years. We have heard so much about the primacy of the contract of employment. For many who took up work prior to March 2020, the contract stipulates the office as the place of work. When the Leader was Minister for Social Protec-

tion, she introduced the Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2018, which recognised that there can be a difference between what is in a contract of employment and the reality of a worker's working week. We talked to a home help employee, somebody in retail and somebody in hospitality. They would have spoken to the Leader, the former Minister, about the need for banded hours. Those same principles can apply now in terms of recognising the arrangements that have evolved successfully over the past two years and that need to be recognised in the conversation. I am very disappointed with the Government's heads of Bill, published during the week. Of course, people will say I would say that. We take issue with the lack of a mechanism to appeal on grounds of refusal and with the effort the Government has made to set out 13 grounds for refusal. I would like to see a clear message go out to the effect that the Government needs to redraft the legislation. It is saying this morning that it is willing to accept amendments but I believe it needs to start afresh.

We are all clear as to why we need to promote flexible work, including for those from rural constituencies. It is to sustain and revive villages and towns and reduce the need for commuting and the financial and carbon costs associated with commuting. The promotion of flexible work would benefit women and those of us in this Chamber who are committed to trying to improve the lot of women in workplaces and ensure they hold on to their jobs and do not have to reduce their hours to part-time hours. The right to flexible work is crucial. I have been following the data for a while. We saw it confirmed by the Central Bank yesterday that the full-time employment of women increased during the pandemic. So many women have said to me they are able to manage their full-time work and those other responsibilities in their lives. If they have to be in the office for 9 a.m., they cannot do the school drop and everything else. We need to send a better message to those women in particular over the coming weeks that they will be supported in staying in their jobs and not having to drop full-time work. The legislative underpinning for this should be very positive and constructive, and it should incentivise employers to help women and all workers with caring responsibilities to stay in the workplace.

Senator Frances Black: This is my first Order of Business of the year and I did not get a chance to come in last week. I take this opportunity to express my sincere and heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of Ms Ashling Murphy. She was a beautiful young woman who was needlessly murdered. I also express my condolences to the family and friends of all the women who have died needlessly and violently at the hands of men in Ireland. I welcome today's statements on gender-based violence and violence against women. The murder of Ashling is so sad and it is clearly not an isolated incident. It provides an opportunity for a watershed moment in Irish history. I did not intend to speak today but I will speak to that matter. Statements may be of little consolation to Ashling's family and friends but we must ensure her death was not in vain.

I call for a discussion of the recent review of care of children in the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, in Kerry. What has happened is truly shocking. We have heard about the risky treatment of 227 children and significant harm done to 46 service users. It is absolutely vital the matter is discussed. How can this happen again? There was nobody really looking to see what was going on down there. It is the same HSE that is closing services at the Owenacurra centre and it is another area that must be addressed. We must consider why that centre is being closed and so many people are being moved out of the service. It is a place they have considered their home for the past 20-odd years. My main call today is for a debate on the review of the care of children under the mental health services in Kerry.

Senator Shane Cassells: Yesterday, RTÉ's director general, Ms Dee Forbes, appeared

before the Oireachtas media committee and one of the key issues we discussed was funding of RTÉ and public media services in general. The RTÉ submission yesterday had a section titled “Why the TV current licence fee model is no longer fit for purpose”. There is approximately €160 million brought in via the television licence but €65 million per year is lost because of evasion, amounting to over €500 million over a ten-year period, with a consequent impact on programming. In the UK the Tories are promoting the idea of abolishing the television licence altogether. It is popular because 60% of people supposedly do not want to pay for a television licence. My television licence costs me €160 but my Sky subscription costs over €1,000 per year.

Before Christmas, the chair of the Independent Broadcasters of Ireland, Mr. John Purcell, came before the committee. He stated bluntly that most of the organisation’s 34 local radio stations would be one week away from closure were it not for the support of the Government and the sound and vision or emergency funding. Our local newspapers got no such funding because there is no similar mechanism for them. It is amazing that we did not lose a whole swathe of them last year. Our national newspapers have seen their advertising customers migrate *en masse* to Facebook.

All this time we have been told the Future of Media Commission report, which has been sitting on the Minister’s desk since October, will provide all the answers to the problems besetting the media in this country. The most farcical thing is it has been leaked to be damned and supposedly proposes abolishing the television licence. That is fantastic. The report will be able to tell us what is wrong but we are not being told how we can fund a different model because the political system ultimately has to make that decision. Through the leaks from its section, we have seen the Department of Finance baulk at the idea of not having a television licence because it would have to pick up the €200 million bill.

Five years ago, a previous Oireachtas committee proposed that the Revenue Commissioners collect the television licence and a move to a household broadcasting charge. Again, the political system did not want to grapple with that hot potato and the can got kicked down the road. We got a report from the Future of Media Commission. I am shocked we have not lost local newspapers and radio stations because this system is so rigid, it cannot deal with the pressing matters before it. I ask that the Minister and the Cabinet publish the report. Judging by the length of time it has taken us to deal with the sector already, it will take us another five years to work through what is in the report.

Who will fund the sector? As a proud member of the National Union of Journalists, I do not want to see us going down the road of having something like Fox News, trashy papers or a generation led by social media news content. It would destroy the very fabric of this country and political discourse. We have seen enough hate and we must ensure we can get a properly funded media sector in this country. It will require the political system to act, the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, to publish the report and the Cabinet to act on those recommendations.

Senator Paul Gavan: Well said.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Get somebody to act.

Senator Shane Cassells: It is a pity the process was not started five years ago when Fine Gael was in government. It had the opportunity to fund RTÉ.

Senator Paddy Burke: We must be close to an election with this type of heated debate

becoming evident.

I ask the Leader to arrange for a debate on credit unions. There was a commitment in the programme for Government for something to be done on how credit unions operate. I presume the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, who has responsibility for credit unions, will soon publish a draft Government policy on credit unions.

Credit unions are seeking various outcomes. They want to do community banking, which would be a great asset to them. They want levies on credit unions abolished because they see them as a form of tax. A good debate could take place in the House on how credit unions could move forward and provide community banking. They already provide great services to local communities, including funding for the lower class. In some towns, they are the only banking service, as I have seen in Ballyhaunis in County Mayo. First Choice Credit Union in Castlebar has taken over the services at Ballyhaunis, Achill and Swinford, providing the banking or credit union services there. Ballyhaunis has no bank at all because the last facility, an Ulster Bank branch, closed. It is a sizeable town and has some of the largest processing industries in the country but the only form of banking it now has is provided by the credit union. I hope the Leader will provide in a timely fashion for a debate on credit unions.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Last night there was a private discussion at the Fine Gael Parliamentary Party-----

Senator Paul Gavan: Really.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy was a member one time.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: -----and the work of the Defence Forces Chief of Staff was brought into disrepute. The matter was reported in the newspapers. It is absolutely outrageous that there would be any comment on the Chief of Staff, who is not in a position to respond.

Senator Paul Gavan: Hear, hear.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: He is a servant of this State. The Minister must go further than he did in the Dáil this morning in making an apology to the Chief of Staff. I am not for a moment justifying anything the Chief of Staff did. The meeting with the Russians was scheduled and the photograph on Twitter was a mistake.

The issue of the Russian fleet being off the south-west coast of this country in the coming weeks carrying out an exercise is something we must monitor. My colleague, Senator McDowell, spoke about the depletion of the Defence Forces over a long time in this country. We must send a Naval Service vessel to the south west with members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence observing what is going on there. Not only that, but they must be there to provide search and rescue for those on the trawlers who are taking their lives into their hands by sailing into a live firing exercise area. I have been involved in live firing events myself down through my career and I can tell the House that when one starts to fire live ammunition, there is no guarantee that there will not be an accident. The Naval Service must go there and I ask the Leader to bring that request to the Minister for Defence and to tell this House next week that it will do that.

I ask the Cathaoirleach to indulge me for a moment as I have to address the issue of Shannon and of aircraft flying in and out.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator has five seconds.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: No aircraft flies into Shannon with troops on board on a mission that has not been authorised under one of the chapters of the United Nations. This needs to stop. If we do not want these aircraft flying in and out of Shannon then we need to address this at UN headquarters and not in this House as it is not the place for it. We are a member of the United Nations and sometimes we have to be involved in the things we do not like, which is the truth of it.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach. I echo the calls of Senators Chambers, McDowell and others for the debate on our Defence Forces. What is happening at the moment exposes the fact that Ireland on its own cannot deal with this. I agree with comments made by Senator Craughwell and others that this is not a neutral country. We are a non-aligned country and I am very proud that we have a non-aligned foreign policy. We have to be very clear, however, because on issues such as human rights abuses and attacks on the sovereignty of other countries, we cannot be neutral. We have to provide support for them. Human rights, incidentally, apply just as much within the European Union as they do on a wider basis, and we should be speaking out about them. Our foreign policy can never be neutral and we should not be afraid to speak out.

I also support the remarks of my colleague, Senator Cassells, about a properly funded public sector media.

I also want to raise the point about the economic battle at the moment, where Ireland's model traditionally used to be one of tax and talent. The tax thing is somewhat to one side now, so it is about a global battle for talent at this point in time. We are seeing the workplace changing more quickly to the point that in the next decade, 65% of current jobs are likely to be either redundant or significantly changed. We have talked before about all of the jobs that are in demand around data scientists, looking at artificial intelligence, AI, cybersecurity and so on. We need to look at having a debate in the context of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and its long-term strategy on how it is going to reskill and upskill all our citizens to be able to cater for that. Retail banking as we know it, for instance, is dead but we have very skilled workers in the banking sector and we need to upskill and reskill them to be able to take advantage of the new opportunities. We need a big debate around the future of work and what we, as a State, are doing to upskill and reskill our citizens to avail of it.

Senator Barry Ward: Gabhaim buíochas, a Chathaoirligh agus a Cheannaire. This week the Government announced €35 million for what it is calling Brexit infrastructure funding for local authority piers and harbours around the country. Reading about this in *Afloat* magazine this week, it is very much talking about the rehabilitation of piers and harbours that are owned by local authorities. My concern about this is that it overlooks those other aspects which may not be directly connected with Brexit, particularly in heritage areas like Dún Laoghaire Harbour and Coliemore and Bullock harbours.

These were ancient sites for trade on the east coast of Ireland in and around Dublin Bay. It is far too easy for the Government overlook the importance of these particular areas that need investment because they are very old sites and in several areas require urgent attention and maintenance. Coliemore and Bullock are two very small harbours close to Dalkey but Dún Laoghaire Harbour, which is an enormous Victorian harbour, has great heritage value but also has a trade potential to be part of our Brexit response. I would be very concerned if this an-

nounced block of funding overlooked harbours like Dún Laoghaire and focused instead, let us say, on Dublin Port, which is a much more commercially viable entity, or on other ports around the country which may not need this funding as much as those smaller, less commercially strong harbours.

Can we have a debate on where that funding is going to go and whether or not we can specifically provide heritage funding for small harbours like Coliemore and Bullock and Dún Laoghaire? Gabhaim buíochas.

Senator John McGahon: I thank the Cathaoirleach. The Leader and many other Members of this House will know that I am very committed to the concept of a flexi-ticket for commuters. It is something that I am very passionate about and have been talking about for a long time. I am very confident that it is something that in the coming weeks or months will get across the line, based on what the National Transport Authority, NTA, is saying. One concern I have, and I spent two hours yesterday speaking to commuters from Drogheda and Dundalk who were going home on the Matthews bus, is the number of people who are having to pay for a monthly or annual ticket today. The cost to go back to Dundalk on the bus is €2,700 a year; to go back on the train it is €3,600 a year or €362 a month. These people are having to pay for these tickets now.

My fear is that the NTA will not have a seamless transition over to a flexi-ticket for someone who has to pay for a monthly or annual ticket today, when it is introduced in perhaps six to eight weeks' time. It is fundamentally unfair that someone would have to fork out for a full monthly or full annual ticket today and then be left with that for the next 12 months. I am asking that we engage with the NTA in some shape or form to ensure that there is a procedure and practice set up for anyone who has to buy a full monthly or annual ticket in January and that they can make a seamless transition over to a flexi-ticket when it is introduced at the end of the first quarter or the start of the second quarter of 2022, as the NTA has advised us.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I rise today to bring to the House's attention, in the context of the evolving situation in Ukraine, the mixed reports on the ground of people living their normal everyday lives, and those reports from the international arena. I note that there are Irish families who are expecting babies in Ukraine. Between now and May, 14 babies are going to be born. I want us to have empathy for those families in what is already an anxious time but with heightened anxiety and distress. I am liaising with the solicitors, the advocacy groups and, most importantly, with the Minister, Deputy Coveney, where he and his team in the Department of Foreign Affairs have continued to be exceptional and will be no less so in this circumstance than they have been in recent years.

There are some families out there who may not have given notification as yet and may not have said it or brought it to their solicitor's attention that they are travelling out. We know of 14 such families for sure and if any others come forward, they can contact me as I am liaising with the Department of Foreign Affairs, in order that we can have contingency plans in place for whatever arises, although, hopefully, nothing will.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Last week I called on the Minister to honour the commitment he gave to tender openly for the position of independent chair for the review of the abortion legislation and I did so because it had by then emerged, by way of a reply to a parliamentary question, that the Department had not fulfilled the commitment but had contacted a small number of persons inviting them to express interest in the position. Yesterday, I said that it did not augur well that the eventual appointment that was made came on foot of such a closed process.

I repeat my call for the Minister to come before this House to explain his and his Department's actions in the matter.

The issue is independence and the perception of independence, and crucial to independence is the issue of perceived impartiality. There was considerable support for me in this House, including I believe from the Leader, when I stressed the importance of independence in the role to be filled by this chairperson. In the past a judge in this country had to recuse herself from an abortion-related case not because she would have shown bias but because there could have been a reasonable perception that impartiality could be wanting because of her previous professional role. Like Caesar's wife, a person in that situation has to be above any doubt or suspicion. That is why an open process is needed to ensure that the choice made would not just be independent but would be seen to be so.

Let us suppose then that a person had shown prior support for the repeal of the eighth amendment, for example, by retweeting a post in favour of repeal, including the hashtag of the repeal campaign at the time of the referendum. Let us suppose there was a pattern of tweets showing a preferred view on abortion, maybe disagreeing with the intervention of Pope Francis on the subject, agreeing with former President McAleese's criticism of the Catholic Church on the subject or joining in an online conversation criticising illegal "No" campaign posters on the N11 during the abortion referendum campaign. The point is that the moderate expression of all of those points of view would be legitimate but it would mean that the poster of such tweets would not be the right choice of appointment for the role of independent chair of the review of operation of legislation in such a sensitive area, however decent a person he or she might be. I am afraid there is no supposing in this case. It is my unhappy role to point out that the appointee in this case has engaged in a pattern of social media intervention along the lines I have described. I, therefore, say that she should honourably withdraw from the role to which she has been appointed, that the Government should re-advertise for the role by way of an open tender process and that the Minister should come before the House now to explain his and his Department's role in all that has led to this undesirable situation.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator Mullen raised a very interesting point. I am not going to name names on the floor of the House but the appointment of the chair by the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is a good appointment. The person is eminently qualified. In fairness to Senator Mullen, there is a need for debate and transparency in all processes. I think what Senator Mullen may be trying to achieve is to have that transparency. I do not agree with him in the context of the appointment of the person, who I think is very qualified. If we were all to have our tweets and Facebook comments judged there would be very few of us left standing with 100% perfection, to be fair.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I am not referring to perfection but perceived independence.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I think what Senator Mullen is saying is that we need a debate on it in the House. That is the importance of what he is asking for.

I ask the Leader to facilitate a debate on transport. The National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland has been published. All of us received a copy in our pigeon holes today or yesterday. It is the strategic framework for future investment decision making on transport. It underpins the work being done under the national development plan and national planning framework in terms of how our future investment will be guided in the development of our country. Senators Burke and McGahon already made interesting comments about the develop-

ment of our country this morning. I hope the Leader will facilitate that debate with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, on the National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland. It is a matter of urgency.

My other point is in the context of legislation for next week. Senator Craughwell and I are on the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications. We have a very important Bill coming to the House next week. I appeal to the Leader not to guillotine that legislation. It is of absolute importance to our aviation sector. It behoves all of us as Members to thoroughly investigate and interrogate that legislation and to work with the Leader and with Government to make our aviation safer and safe for those who use it while working and travelling.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I wish to raise the issue of the age threshold for parental leave. From September 2020 each parent is entitled to 26 weeks' unpaid parental leave. However, they must take that leave before the child is 12 years of age, or 16 if the child has a disability. I recently wrote to the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, to ask if his Department would consider increasing the age limit to 14 or 15 years. I have been approached by a large number of parents who are struggling with childcare especially during school holidays. In 2019, the Parental Leave Act was amended and the leave period was increased from 18 to 22 and then 26 weeks from September 2020. However, the threshold was also increased from eight to 12 years of age. I am asking that we consider increasing the threshold in order that parents can avail of the leave during the holidays.

Despite how sensible many 13 or 14 year olds might be, they can panic and react in an unexpected way to incidents at home. Unfortunately, many parents have no other option but to take the calculated risk as many teenagers object to being babysat and are eager to prove how grown up they are. There are all sorts of camps for children under 12 to keep them busy during the summer holidays. However, once they reach 12 these camps are very limited. Times have changed. Statistics show us, and we can all readily observe, that children and young adults today live their lives with mobile devices in their hands. It is not only the stranger outside the home that is the fear now. Parents now face risks which include children coming into contact with adults posing as children online, strangers who persuade teenagers to meet them in real life and online scammers. The risks to children inside the home are now an even bigger worry for parents. I ask the Minister to consider increasing the age limit for parental leave to ensure that parents who want to avail of it for their teenager can do so.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I ask that we have a debate with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on childcare providers. There is a whole range of things that we need to do to improve the service and how they manage. Parents are telling me about a real situation at the moment on foot of the really positive news last week that everything is reopening. We have parents across the country who have had children at home for the last two years. They are now getting calls from their employers to come back to work next week and they are trying to get childcare. The earliest a person I have been talking to can get childcare providers is August. Some parents are being told next February. There is real worry and panic for people being asked to come back to work, which the employers are more than entitled to request. I would encourage employers to be in some way understanding of the changes that parents and employees have had over the last two years.

We really need to support these childcare providers as a Government. We need to do so throughout the next years and we need a long-term plan. However, there is an immediate issue in terms of supporting childcare providers. There is no financial benefit for them taking in

young babies. They make no money out of it. We need to support the childcare providers to be able to take in more young babies. I am getting calls daily from extremely worried parents who need to go back to work and can get no childcare provider. It was really good news last week but it is really changing what working parents have been doing for the last two years. We need to figure out a way of managing that over the coming months.

Senator Aisling Dolan: The consultation process for the Dublin to Galway cycleway has been extended. It was due to close on 31 January but has been extended until the end of February. This gives more opportunity for landowners and farmers to engage with our cycleway project team and public liaison officers. Our Fine Gael councillors in Galway engaged with the project team to request an extension. It is so important that we acknowledge these corridors for public consultation.

The only way we can achieve this project is through engagement with our landowners and farmers; it is by consensus. It is very important that our communities recognise that this wonderful project which will deliver for them and their areas is very much thanks to the landowners in our local areas. The primary focus, of course, is on State-owned lands along canal banks and boglands where possible. I would encourage landowners and farmers to have early engagement with the public liaison officers, and also to review the Code of Best Practice for National and Regional Greenways. It was just published in December with input from many stakeholders in this process. The code details accommodation works that can be provided, including erection of walls, gates, fencing, farm crossings and water troughs. It provides information on the greenway sustainability payment. Landowners and farmers can take on their own independent adviser or agronomist. For people who want to find out more, the document can be posted out to families. They can contact the Galway to Athlone cycleway at info@galwaytoathlonecycleway.com or by calling 091 509267. Now is the time to find out all the information they need and to engage and make sure we do it by consensus in order that the route selected will be of benefit to all in the community.

Senator Maria Byrne: I welcome yesterday's announcement by the Taoiseach that there is going to be an investigation and priority given to University Hospital Limerick, and that the Taoiseach is going to engage with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. I thank the Leader and Deputy Leader for making contact with the Taoiseach and for their work on this. A report was commissioned by the HSE on drug and alcohol abuse in the context of babies being born. The figures for 2020 were up significantly. We need to carry out an assessment to look at what happened during Covid in relation to drugs and alcohol. It is frightening to find that children are being born with symptoms of drug and alcohol abuse. The issue needs to be dealt with. I would like a review to be carried out.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome this morning's news that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has announced that the Seanad by-election will take place and that 11 February 2022 is the date by which nominations must be received. This is good news. It was officially announced this morning. We must always welcome elections. I wish all of the people who have been considering standing for election for a long time the best of luck. It will, no doubt, be a challenging and an exciting election. It will be great to see a new Member in Seanad Éireann.

Senator Martin Conway: Senator Dolan and others have spoken of the importance of greenways and the connectivity and marketing opportunities they present. It is time to organise a debate in this House on the future of tourism. The last time Ireland was in a recession,

back in 2009, 2010 and 2011, tourism was the first industry to help kick-start our economy. Pre-pandemic, some 10 million people visited this country from abroad every year. We need to constantly upgrade our tourism offering and invest in our gold-plated tourism attractions, such as the Cliffs of Moher and other places. We also need to have good-quality, silver-plated tourist attractions that might not necessarily be as high-profile but would be interesting and keep people in areas for longer. The better and more substantial the offering we have, the more tourists will come to our country. We have a golden opportunity because of our beautiful landscape. We are an island nation with phenomenal panoramic views. Tourism will play a huge role in the future of this country. A debate on tourism would be opportune at some stage in the not-too-distant future.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach agus leis an gCeannaire. I reiterate a call, which I referred to during the week but did not get a chance to speak on specifically. Colleagues from across the Chamber referred to the need for statements from the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Simon Coveney, on the Passport Office, the huge increase in demand for passports and the measures the Department will take to respond to that. I have raised this issue consistently since 2016, when I saw it coming down the track, not least with the upsurge post-Brexit in new applications from across the island and, in particular, from Britain. This warrants not just statements but also serious consideration from the Government, given the consistent references to it in this Chamber and the real concern among representatives across the board. The Government must tell us what it is going to do to address this issue.

In the past, as Members who were here pre-pandemic will know, officials from the Passport Office came into the Houses every year to facilitate a worthwhile briefing for Members on the work the office does. I have great admiration for Passport Office staff and none of those who raise these issues are calling into question their dedication and commitment. Over the past weeks and months, however, anyone who has been dealing with these issues will have noticed an acute increase in waiting times, leading to delays, backlogs and concerns. While there are issues around travel that relate to passports, a passport is an important document for a whole range of reasons and it may be needed for many reasons other than travel.

I welcome the momentum that is building among groups on the issue. I encourage all of us to work together to ensure that we do not just tick a box, as welcome as statements would be. I do not say that to be disparaging but we must work together collectively to use the influence of the Seanad to ensure the Government meets demand for passports and invests in and improves Passport Service delivery and infrastructure. One of the best ways it could do that would be to open a passport office in the North, where there is such high demand. I thought I would get this call in now while I have the chance.

Senator Erin McGreehan: I thank the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Charlie McConalogue, and the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Heather Humphreys, for renewing their annual call for people to protect lambs and sheep from dog attacks, especially during lambing season. As someone from a farming community and a sheep farmer, I know the damage that dogs can do to pregnant ewes and lambs. It is devastating. Our family had 13 sheep killed last year in just one incident. All that is needed is for the dog owner to love animals, as we love our animals, and to protect them as they should protect them by keeping the dogs safe, away from sheep and in kennels. I ask people who walk with a dog on commonage land to keep it on a lead. The dog does not know the fluffy animal in the distance is not a teddy or for fun. The dog does not know that sheep need to be protected. The dog believes the sheep is something to be played with. It is not the dog's fault for killing

sheep but the owner's fault.

An Cathaoirleach: After the Leader's response to the Order of Business, we will hold a minute's silence for the victims of the Holocaust on this International Holocaust Remembrance Day. I ask the Leader to respond to the Order of Business.

Senator Regina Doherty: It is obvious from some of the engagement that most Members had their Weetabix this morning. It was lovely that the "C" word was mentioned only once in the five pages of notes I made this morning. It is great to be back to normal. I hope by next week we will be back to normal in the Chamber, sitting close to each other and working collectively as we normally do.

I thank Senator McGreehan for raising the issue of dog attacks on sheep. I welcome the statements this morning by the Ministers, Deputies McConalogue and Humphreys. I live beside a very large sheep farm. In the past week, the farmer posted up some pictures of what is absolute devastation. There is the normal outcry about dogs but the Senator is absolutely right that it is not the dogs' fault but the owners' fault. In Ireland we have a high rate of dog ownership and we love dogs. Most people have one dog, if not a few of them, but we must be responsible and recognise that we are talking about people's livelihoods and that sheep are also living, breathing animals to be cared for, as well as everything else. I thank the Senator for raising the issue this morning.

Senator Ó Donnghaile will be pleased to know that the Fine Gael Party will introduce a Private Members' motion in the Seanad next Wednesday to discuss exactly the topic he and others have raised in recent days. The matter is as important as the Senator stressed in his contribution. It is very important to get the Passport Office back into the House to give us a new briefing. It is taking on 300 new staff and there is a proposal for the office to operate seven days as opposed to five days a week. We all have good and positive suggestions to get ready for what will be an onslaught this year as people look for travel documents, which is great. I just want to let the Senator know that.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: I thank the Leader.

Senator Regina Doherty: Senator Martin Conway asked for a debate on tourism. The Senator is absolutely right that the tourism industry was one of the sectors that caused the rebound in 2011 and 2012. I hope it will be as fruitful again as the country rebounds after Covid. I will organise that debate as well as I can.

Senator Boyhan just made the announcement that the closing date for nominations for the by-election is 11 February.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I did not make the announcement as such. I just passed on what I heard.

Senator Regina Doherty: It is great and, obviously, a new Senator will bring added excitement. I wish everybody who participates in the election the best of luck.

On Senator Maria Byrne's point, I acknowledge that the Taoiseach has acquiesced to the suggestions we made. Senators Gavan and Conway also raised the issue here recently. There is certainly something unusual going on in Limerick and it is necessary to discover what it is. The only way we can do that is to have the investigation. I welcome the Taoiseach's commitment to

do that. Hopefully, the investigation will be speedy, independent and transparent.

Senator Maria Byrne also referred to a report I read the other day, which is disturbing. It is on the number of babies who were born in recent years suffering from withdrawal symptoms from drugs and alcohol. This highlights that we need to give more supports to some women who experience extra stresses in pregnancy, other than the obvious stresses we all know can arise.

Senator Dolan spoke about the Galway cycleway consultation process being extended today.

Senator Ahearn and another colleague asked for a debate on childcare. I will organise that as soon as I can. I know that the Minister is absolutely intent on providing new and extra funding to the childcare sector each and every year for the next number of years. However, there certainly is an immediate crisis with regard to the lack of places because people have been working from home. I will organise that debate.

Senator Carrigy asked for the threshold of parental leave to be increased from the current European standard of 12 years of age to 15 years of age. I will bring that to the Minister's attention.

Senator Buttimer asked for a transport debate on the wider national development plan with regard to the provision of roads etc. He also raised another issue. As Members are aware, there has been a break in Committee Stage of the Air Navigation and Transport Bill for a number of months now to allow for consultation between Members who have concerns - I happen to be one of them - and the relevant experts in both the Department and the Irish Aviation Authority, IAA. That Bill is coming back before the House next Wednesday. I give Members a commitment that Committee Stage will not be guillotined. We should not be guillotining any Bill in any House, unless there is a national emergency. There certainly is not, other than improving the safety of our aviation industry, which really is an emergency, in my opinion. There will be no guillotining of that Bill. Senator Buttimer also mentioned transparency, in support of Senator Mullen's contribution before him. I am loath to even relate this back but we had a debacle over the summer about how doing things in a non-transparent way in an open process gets people into trouble. I think we have just gone and done it all again. I really do not understand why this has happened, if we have an independent process to take on board a chair for a body of work that is going to be incredibly important, and perhaps contentious. There may be different opinions; that is fine. We need to have confidence in the independence of the chair. We have heard people expressing different views today. I will certainly ask the Minister to come and explain why the process was not as open as was originally intended before Christmas.

Senator Seery Kearney requested that we reach out to the families of the parents who may be having surrogate babies between now and the summer in Ukraine, to enable them to engage with the Department of Foreign Affairs to ensure that there is a safe transition home when the babies are born. We will certainly facilitate that if we can.

Senator McGahon talked about the three-day flexi ticket that he has been talking about and getting implemented for the last number of years. It is lovely to see that it is going to be implemented. It is a real plus. However, it would not leave a good taste in your mouth if you had just forked out and could not get a refund. I will get in contact with the National Transport Authority, NTA, to ensure that there is a smooth transition.

Senator Ward asked for a debate on Brexit funding for our piers and harbours. I will see if I can organise that.

Senator Malcolm Byrne asked for a debate on the global battle for talent and the future of work in Ireland. I will certainly ask the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to come and talk to us about that. The Senator also touched on media funding and the Defence Forces.

Senator Craughwell spoke of potentially sending a naval ship to the area off the south-west coast of Ireland, starting, I think next week-----

Senator Malcolm Byrne: With him at the head of it.

Senator Regina Doherty: With him at the head of it, probably, and other Oireachtas Members. I am not sure how feasible it is-----

Senator Victor Boyhan: I will pass on that one.

Senator Regina Doherty: -----but I will certainly pass on the request to the Minister and let him respond directly.

Senator Paddy Burke asked for a debate on credit unions in Ireland and the community banking model, as he has done before, to be fair to him. I will see if I can get that organised.

Senator Cassells, in the way that only he can, spoke passionately about the importance of local print media. We can all see how passionate he is about it. We have been talking about the issue for ten years. To be fair to the Senator, he is right that the time for talking on this issue, and on many other issues, needs to stop and the time for doing needs to start. I will make a call to the Minister's office today to find out when the report will be published and come back to the Senator. I think it would be very worthwhile to have a debate in this House on what we see is the future of media, particularly local media, and not just local radio, which is supported, but local print media, which we all know is important.

I welcome Senator Black back to the Chamber. I know she has been working elsewhere. I thank her for her comments today. I will certainly look for a debate on youth mental health services. If she does not mind, I do not think we should have a debate just on the Kerry case. What we read was shocking beyond words. The father of young Jason was on the radio this morning. I do not know if the Senators heard him. I am not sure that this is just a local issue. The Taoiseach announced yesterday that there will be an independent nationwide review of CAMHS and oversight mechanisms. I think we should have the debate on a nationwide basis. We must debate the issue of how little we spend on youth mental health services. I know that the issue is very close to Senator Black's heart, as it is to mine. The fact is that of the €1.3 billion the State spends on mental health every year, less than 10% is spent on our children. The biggest crisis that we have is in our children's mental health at the moment. I will organise that debate as quickly as I can.

Senator Sherlock raised the issue of the heads of Bill that were announced by the Tánaiste on Tuesday with regard to the quality of work-life balance and the ability to request and have proper, sincere engagement and replies from employees, which was not always the case before Covid. I hear her concerns. Having been the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection for four years, I share some of them. However, I think the world genuinely has changed

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in the past two years. I really hope that the moves by some of our particularly large employers have bona fides. We will tease that out within the heads of the Bill and the pre-legislative scrutiny. I know that the Senator will certainly bring all her concerns from her experience to the table. Hopefully, we will improve the legislation to get that proper work-life balance as a right for people and not just something that we are talking about.

I will be very bold and tell Senator Gavan that I am not going to go near the first topic he raised today, if he does not mind. I was not here before Christmas when he brought up the case of the man in County Kilkenny. It really is heartwarming to hear that people actually do sometimes listen and respond. I wish him and the Senator, who is supporting him, continued success. I hope his legal status gets rectified as quickly as possible.

In response to the issues raised by Senator McDowell, I noted earlier, and I probably continuously get myself into trouble for saying these things, that Cathal Brugha Barracks is an active operational barracks at the moment. The announcement that was made by the Minister this morning was totally ill-judged and was made at the wrong time.

Senator Michael McDowell: Hear, hear. It is demoralising-----

Senator Regina Doherty: I know we need houses. I do not really have an explanation for the Senator, but as Senator Chambers and Senator Malcolm Byrne mentioned, we need a debate on the Defence Forces. I will see if I can organise it in the next few weeks. I was at a loss when that announcement was made this morning.

In response to the issues raised by Senator Kyne, we will certainly have a debate on the issue of GPs. I know their world has changed significantly in the last 22 or 23 months. Their workload has increased by 40%, which is significant, given that we have the impression that nobody goes to their GP any more, which clearly is not true. We definitely have a crisis not just in rural Ireland, where there are no GPs, but in urban Ireland, where there are GPs but not enough of them to go around for the number of people that there are. I will organise a debate as quickly as I can. I wish the Senator and the people in Rossaveel every success in combining what would be a great project on wind development along with the deep harbour. If there is anything I can do to assist the Senator or get information for him, I will.

Senator Chambers opened today's proceedings and spoke about her sister's interview on Newstalk. I did not hear it live but went back and listened to it. It was powerful. The issue at stake is endometriosis and the fact that we have only recently just opened the first clinic in Tal-laght for every woman in Ireland, who has to travel there. It is like other issues in that women are supposed to silently suffer and put up with it just because they are women. I am sorry, but we are not putting up with anything any more. I thank the Senator for raising the issue today. We will definitely organise a debate on that, as well as the issue of menstrual health in Irish society and how we deal with, treat and support women, in the coming weeks.

Order of Business agreed to.

Minute's Silence for Victims of the Holocaust

An Cathaoirleach: Today, 27 January 2022, the 77th anniversary of the liberation of Aus-

chwitz-Birkenau, is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which takes place to encourage the remembrance of victims of genocide across the world. Holocaust Memorial Day is an international day to remember more than 6 million Jewish people - men, women and children - who were killed during the Holocaust, as well as millions of other people who were persecuted by Nazi Germany during the Second World War.

The Holocaust profoundly affected countries in which Nazi crimes were perpetrated, with universal implications and consequences in many other parts of the world. In memory of the victims of the Holocaust, to demonstrate that we have not forgotten them, I ask Members to rise and, in solidarity with many of the national parliaments across the world, to share a minute's silence to mark the day and keep alive the memory of all those who suffered as a result of the Holocaust.

Members rose.

An Cathaoirleach: Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha.

Sitting suspended at 12.41 p.m. and resumed at 1 p.m.

Garda Síochána (Functions and Operational Areas) Bill 2021: Second Stage

Question proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I welcome the Minister for Justice to the House and she has ten minutes initially.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am pleased to bring the Garda Síochána (Functions and Operational Areas) Bill 2021 before the House. The Bill facilitates the introduction of a new Garda Síochána operating model and provides for drug-testing of Garda members and civilian staff working within An Garda Síochána. The main aim of the legislation is to make the technical changes needed to allow the operating model to be fully rolled out.

The new operating model will enhance the structure, processes and governance of An Garda Síochána, shifting a greater emphasis to local policing. The Bill amends references to Garda districts on the Statute Book to facilitate a divisional policing model. Most of the references to "Garda district" will be replaced with references to "Garda division". All services will be managed and co-ordinated at divisional level.

Divisions will be the primary operational and administrative units, acting as building blocks for the delivery of day-to-day policing. They will be more responsive to community needs and demands. The move from a district model to a divisional model has been recommended by the Garda Inspectorate on the basis that it would lead to greater consistency in the use of resources and would provide an opportunity to deploy members of the Garda with specific skills into certain areas such as the investigation of economic crime and cybercrime and, of relevance to our discussion later today, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Most importantly for the public, the new model will provide increased Garda visibility, more front-line gardaí and a wide range of specialised policing services in their local area.

At present, there are 28 divisions, each divided into districts. Under the new structure, there will be 19 larger divisions with autonomy to run local operations, while ensuring consistency and quality of service within the corporate framework. A division will have four functional areas covering: community engagement, which includes roads, victim support, incident response and community policing; crime, which includes serious crime, security intelligence and immigration; performance assurance, which includes performance standards, internal discipline and engagement with the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission; and, finally, business services, which includes finance and logistics, human resources and general administration.

The operating model is being implemented within the wider programme of policing reform under A Policing Service for the Future, which is the Government's plan to implement the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. In September 2018, the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland was published. The report presents a very clear vision for the future of An Garda Síochána. The consultation by the commission led to the development of key principles for policing in Ireland with a comprehensive set of recommendations to meet current and future challenges. This Bill relates to a significant part of the plan, that is, the introduction of a new organisational operating model for An Garda Síochána.

The Garda Inspectorate's Changing Policing in Ireland report of 2015 also supports the organisational changes being made. It underlines the advantages of having a smaller number of divisions and regions proposed in the new structure.

The operating model is being introduced as part of the Commissioner's role under the Garda Síochána Act 2005 for the general management and administration of the organisation, including the deployment of members of An Garda Síochána throughout the State. Work has been under way for some time in An Garda Síochána to prepare for and implement the new organisational structure. The model was announced by the Commissioner in August 2019.

The Bill will also amend the rank at which certain responsibilities are assigned to ensure that the output and delivery of relevant services are not affected by the changes being made. There are numerous responsibilities assigned, in statute, to Garda members at superintendent rank. Given that roles at superintendent level are to be allocated on a functional rather than geographical basis, some statutory functions assigned to superintendents under the current model would be concentrated with a single superintendent of a division under a new structure. As this concentration of workload would impact on the delivery of the relevant services, for this reason the Bill reassigns some of the functions of a superintendent to the rank of inspector.

Part 4 of the Bill concerns amendments to the Garda Síochána Act 2005 to provide for drug testing within An Garda Síochána. A recent report of the independent Garda Síochána Inspectorate, entitled Countering the Threat of Internal Corruption, found that An Garda Síochána should further develop substance abuse policies and procedures and introduce testing mechanisms. The amendments in this Bill will address those recommendations and will contribute to preventing and reducing corruption.

The establishment of an anti-corruption unit by the Commissioner in November 2020 highlights that the organisation is developing a range of policies to combat corruption in all its forms. The introduction of drug testing will contribute to upholding the reputation and the integrity of An Garda Síochána, and to maintaining public confidence in the quality of policing services that are being delivered. The Bill, while technical, is an important piece of the legislative framework enabling the progression of policing reform measures.

Turning now to the individual provisions of the Bill, section 1 contains the standard Short Title and commencement provisions. Section 2 sets out definitions used in the Bill.

Section 3 revokes the Garda Síochána (Designations, Appointments and Discipline) Regulations 1924, which set out that the Garda Síochána is to be divided into districts and divisions. Subsections (2), (3) and (4) of section 3 are transitional provisions concerning the revocation of Regulation 1, which relates to divisions. These transitional provisions are necessitated by the fact that the operating model is to be introduced on a division-by-division basis. The legal basis for the model will be the determination of the Commissioner under section 33 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005. Subsection (5) provides definitions for terms used in that section.

Section 4 provides for the amendment of 32 Acts set out in Schedule 1 and seven statutory instruments set out in Schedule 2. References in that legislation to Garda “districts” will be replaced with references to “divisions” or other appropriate wording. It also amends references to “the superintendent” of a district. In most cases, this will be replaced with references to “a superintendent” in a division. This change is necessary, given that there will be multiple superintendents in each division. In some cases, this will be replaced with references to “an inspector”.

The transfer of responsibilities is being made to ensure that the new structure does not have any impact on the delivery of the relevant services. The Bill makes this change in respect of gaming and lotteries in the context of the issue of fitness and probity certificates for the purposes of betting licences and for managers and beneficial owners of private members’ gaming clubs. Where the function concerned is administrative in nature - for example, notice of a court application is to be given - the Bill assigns those functions to inspector level.

While not directly related to the introduction of the operating model, an issue was identified during the drafting process that a number of pieces of legislation refer to the “Dublin Metropolitan Area”. This term is not used by An Garda Síochána, nor is it defined in legislation. The Bill makes amendments to clarify that references to the “Dublin Metropolitan Area” are to be read as references to the “Dublin Metropolitan Region”, which is a region of An Garda Síochána.

Section 5 provides for the amendment of miscellaneous provisions listed in Schedules 3 and 4 to replace the phrase “district or place” with “area or place”. There are several provisions across the Statute Book that use this phrase. They generally allow for a requirement to be imposed on a person that he or she reside in a particular district or place. This is the case when a person is released on bail, for example. As the word “district” could be understood to be a Garda district, it is being replaced with the word “area”.

Section 6 provides for the amendment of the Firearms Act 1925 to provide a power for a superintendent to delegate specific functions. It inserts a new section 25CA into the Act. Under this section, a superintendent may appoint an inspector to perform certain licensing functions of the superintendent under the Act. These functions will remain at superintendent level. However, the proposed legislation facilitates the delegation by a superintendent of those functions, other than revocation functions, to an inspector. As the new Garda divisions will be larger in geographical size, it is envisaged that the delegation mechanism will be used to avoid the build-up of backlogs under the new model.

Section 7 amends section 10 of the Sex Offenders Act 2001, which requires persons to whom the legislation applies to make certain specific notifications at a district or divisional

headquarters. References to district headquarters are to be removed, as they will no longer exist. Instead, the Commissioner will be able to designate stations other than district headquarters at which notifications can be made. The designation of Garda Síochána stations will be in writing and a list of the relevant stations must be published.

Section 8 is similar to section 7. It amends section 92 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006, which requires a person to whom the legislation applies to make certain specific notifications at a district or divisional headquarters. The reference to district headquarters is to be removed, as they will no longer exist. The Commissioner will be able to designate stations other than district headquarters at which notifications can be made. The designation of Garda Síochána stations will be made in writing and a list of the relevant stations must be published.

Section 9 provides a power for the Minister to amend specific references to a Garda district or Garda rank in statutory instruments and to make certain other amendments to give effect to a determination of the Commissioner of the Garda Síochána under section 33(1) of the Garda Síochána Act 2005, which deals with the distribution of Garda members. The purpose of this section is to allow the Minister to make a statutory instrument to amend other statutory instruments that refer to the word “district”. It is intended that any such amendment will be along the same lines as those being made in the Bill.

Section 10 is a general provision designed to capture any reference to Garda districts in the Statute Book that are not amended by the Bill. It clarifies that references to “district” on the Statute Book can be construed as references to the equivalent division. It also provides that references to superintendent in the context of a district are to be construed as references to a superintendent of the Garda Síochána in the equivalent division.

Section 11 provides that a reference in legislation to a Garda division will be read as a reference to a Garda Síochána division. This is to clarify the meaning of “Garda division”, which is not generally defined in legislation at the moment.

Section 12 provides for the construction of references to Royal Irish Constabulary or Civic Guard districts as Garda Síochána divisions. There are several references to police districts in legislation dating from before the establishment of An Garda Síochána. This provision makes it clear that they are now to be understood as references to Garda divisions.

Sections 13 to 27, inclusive, are transitional provisions relating to the amendments being made by section 4. The transitional provisions address situations where, for example, court proceedings relating to an Act being amended are ongoing at the time the legislation comes into force. They will also address situations where an application has been submitted before the date of commencement but has not yet been determined. The purpose of the section is to ensure that court processes or applications will not in any way be adversely affected by the coming into force of the legislation.

Section 28 amends section 3(1) of the Garda Síochána Act 2005. It adds the definitions of “controlled drug”, “psychoactive substance” and “sample” to the 2005 Act.

Section 29 amends section 26 of the 2005 Act. It provides that the Garda Commissioner may perform the functions assigned to him or her by regulations that establish, maintain and operate the drug testing regime.

Section 30 amends section 122(1) of the 2005 Act. It adds the establishment, maintenance

and operation of a drug testing regime to the list of issues for which the Minister may, having consulted with the Garda Commissioner and with the approval of the Government, utilise a regulation-making power. Section 30(b) inserts a new subsection in the 2005 Act that sets out the individuals to whom drug testing will apply: applicants to the position of Garda member; Garda trainees; existing members; and civilian staff of An Garda Síochána.

Section 31 amends section 123(2) of the 2005 Act. This amendment expands upon the Minister's pre-existing regulation-making power with regard to discipline. It provides that any drug test failure or any failure to comply with the drug testing regulations made under section 30 will result in a disciplinary procedure.

Section 32 amends Schedule 5 to the 2005 Act, which deals with breaches of discipline. Section 32 reflects the fact that intoxication in the context of a breach of discipline includes "liquor, controlled drugs or psychoactive substances" as opposed to the Schedule previously referring to "liquor and drugs" only.

I thank Senators for their attention. This Bill is just one part of a wider programme of reform measures being undertaken by An Garda Síochána, a programme that includes several legislative measures. I look forward to debating each of them in the House with colleagues in the near future.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Minister. There was a lot to get through there.

Senator Barry Ward: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire agus an mBille chomh maith. The Minister has gone through some of the extensive details. This is not a small Bill, although I recognise that it is largely technical. I congratulate the Minister on introducing it because she and all Members of this House want as effective a police force as we can manage. Where that requires legislative change, it is appropriate that we make those changes in a Bill such as this.

This is a technical Bill. Reading through it, I was astonished to learn how many times the term "Dublin Metropolitan Area" was used even though that structure does not actually exist. It is appropriate and welcome that this be corrected. There are references to much older legislation, for example, the Dublin Police Act, which shows how out of date some of our legislation is. It reminds me of the statute law revision project that is under way within the Office of the Attorney General. Given that offences are still being prosecuted in courts in Dublin under the Dublin Police Act, it is high time that we reformed the area and considered changing those offences or bringing them under the aegis of legislation such as this.

I have stated a number of times that, to the greatest extent possible, we should be moving towards amending older Acts and creating new ones rather than having a raft of legislation that refers to earlier parts, but the breadth of Acts referred to in this Bill is such that I understand why the Bill has been put together in this way.

The organisational structure is largely academic. Given that the report has recommended certain steps, I do not have a difficulty with them. I cannot say with any authority whether they will work, but I accept the Minister's assertion that this Bill is providing an assurance that there will be a continued effectiveness of the Garda at every level under those changes. Setting that aside, the part that jumps out most at me is the drug testing element. It is surprising that there has not been a facility to test gardaí, and that should also extend to prison officers. These people, who are particularly vulnerable to manipulation if they are engaging in illegal activity

relating to drugs, should be in a different category from ordinary citizens. There are obviously difficulties from the point of view of bodily integrity and constitutional rights with the population as a whole. However, if a member of An Garda Síochána who is there to enforce the law on drugs is engaging in illegal activity, it creates a unique vulnerability for corruption and can create other difficulties for that member. I welcome the provisions in section 30 to provide for the power for drug testing of gardaí. It protects the gardaí themselves, assuming that they are not engaging in such activity, which is true of the vast majority of gardaí because no aspersions can be cast on them for their behaviour in that regard. I also welcome that provision.

The anti-corruption thread in the Bill is very important. I welcome the steps the Commissioner has taken to deal with corruption. Where there is corruption in a police force - we have seen that elsewhere on this island - it is pervasive in the damage it does to society. It erodes confidence in that force and erodes the ability of that force to do its work because if the people do not have confidence in the force and it does not enjoy their support, it cannot function. I welcome all attempts to ensure we have a force that is above reproach in that regard. I hope and think that is true of most members - obviously, it cannot be true of all of them, just as it is not true of every member of any category. I welcome what the Commissioner has done and what this Bill will do to ensure we have the greatest possible protections against corruption in legislation.

I wish to address some particular aspects of the Bill. I know the Minister is introducing this legislation to ensure we have as effective a police force as possible. Not being an expert on the subject, I cannot make a particular statement on the provisions relating to the reorganisation. However, there may be missed opportunities.

For example, section 7 amends section 10 of the Sex Offenders Act. We often speak about the sex offenders register that applies to people convicted of certain offences. There is a view at large that there is in Garda stations a big paper ledger that can be opened and one can go to page 52 and there is the guy who is a sex offender and it is possible to see that the person is on the register. Of course, that does not reflect the reality at all. The sex offenders register is not, in fact, a register in real terms, but a set of obligations placed on a person who is convicted of offences.

One of the gaps that was created in the Sex Offenders Act 2001 was the requirement for a sex offender to notify a Garda district headquarter. It did not have to be the one in which they were living or the one in which they were about to live, for example, if they were changing address. It meant that somebody living in Wexford could in theory notify Letterkenny Garda district headquarters. Maybe that has been fixed but I do not think it has. There might be an opportunity to amend this Bill to correct a small gap in the sex offenders legislation. I would obviously welcome corrections there.

I also welcome the change to section 3 of the Bail Act, which makes absolute sense. It can sometimes be unnecessarily difficult if bail conditions specify the station or district within which things must be done.

Many Garda stations are not open 24 hours a day. The Minister will be aware that dealing with stations that are not open 24 hours a day creates a difficulty for people. Reorganising the administrative areas in that way would probably make it administratively simpler for people to do what courts require them to do. Has any consideration been given to Garda stations that are not open 24 hours a day? Has there been any examination of Garda stations that were closed?

Stepaside Garda station is probably the most famous station that was reopened. I do not know if there has been any review of the effectiveness of that. In my area the Garda stations at Kill of the Grange and Dalkey were closed. Have we done any assessment of whether that has had an impact on the policing of the local area? Can we reassure people that it has not?

There is much in the Bill and I welcome it. I have not even gone through all the notes I had on it. It will bring about effective and positive change to policing in Ireland. I wish the Minister luck with it and I welcome the Bill.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: The Minister is very welcome back to the House this afternoon to address this issue. I commend her on outlining in detail the contents of the Bill, which, as she said, is mainly technical in nature. I note the Commissioner's comments on the Bill. He said:

These changes will see us deliver a more responsive, more efficient and better service to local communities.

It will mean increased numbers of gardaí working on the frontline, better investigations of crimes against the vulnerable such as sexual crime, and community policing teams dedicated to working with communities to identify and tackle problem crimes in their area.

How could anybody have a problem with any of that? If it delivers what he hopes, we will all be happy.

I take this opportunity to again pay tribute to the gardaí on the ground who do such great work on behalf of us all. They go to work in the morning with no guarantee that they will come back to their loved ones that evening. We should never lose sight of that. Unfortunately, there have been too many examples of gardaí who went to their work in the morning and never returned. I acknowledge the work they have done, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The experience of people I have spoken to throughout the country has been very positive. It may have been because garda shifts were extended to 12-hour shifts which resulted in more gardaí out on the streets. It allowed for more engagement with the general public, which is very positive, something that was perhaps lost in recent years. I was delighted to see that engagement being so positive. It is something we should reflect on. It shows the benefit of having gardaí on the streets during peak times, when they are most needed.

My experience of the centralisation of services has not always been a positive one. I am thinking of the centralisation of health services, in particular. I am concerned about how this will work out on the ground. In my neck of the woods, the headquarters of the Cavan-Monaghan Garda division is located in Monaghan town where I live and it caters for Cavan and Monaghan. Under this new proposal, we will lose that because that division will be amalgamated with the one in County Louth, with the headquarters located in Louth. I am concerned about that because Louth has towns like Dundalk and Drogheda which have problems requiring greater policing than a town like Monaghan or Cavan would have. That is not to say we do not have our own problems, but perhaps resources will be located in Louth as opposed to in Cavan or Monaghan. I cannot be certain that will be the outcome and I sincerely hope that will not be the case. Will there be a review mechanism to see how these things are working out in practice? Will there be an opportunity to have a look at this down the road to see how it is performing?

On that subject, the Garda district as it was will no longer exist. The system of Garda dis-

districts meant there was focus on all activity within that district and it was very much localised. There is no more word of Garda districts, with talk only of divisions and those divisions becoming bigger. Some people are concerned about the effect that will have on policing at a local level where resources will naturally be targeted in areas where crime is at its highest, which is only right. I sincerely hope it will not be at the expense of places like counties Monaghan and Cavan.

By and large, I welcome the Bill. Every organisation needs to look at itself from time to time to see how it can improve and the Garda Síochána should be no different in that regard. There have been wide and extensive discussions about this between the Garda Inspectorate and the Policing Authority and everybody seems to be happy to move forward with this model, although I have voiced my concerns about how that might work out on the ground. There are new anti-corruption methods and there is drug testing. That is welcome and should be taken as a given.

In this country, there has been a unique relationship between the people and the Garda. It is something very special. We talk about best international practice as the model on which we should try to model our system, but I believe we are unique. We have an unarmed police force. There always has been, is and hopefully always will be a unique close relationship between citizens and members of the Garda. It is unique to this country and it is something we should hold onto at all costs.

In summary, I welcome this legislation. I have mentioned some of my concerns and perhaps the Minister will take the opportunity to comment on them. We all embrace anything that delivers a better service to our communities. Any system that results in more gardaí on the beat, dealing and interacting with people, is something for which we all strive. I hope the Bill does what it says on the tin, if I can use that expression, and that the general public will be the beneficiary of it. On behalf of the Fianna Fáil group, I am delighted to support it. I hope it results in an even better relationship between the Garda and the people it serves and protects daily.

Senator Michael McDowell: I welcome the Minister. I fully support this legislation. The need for An Garda Síochána to modernise its structures is beyond contradiction. I recall that when I occupied the current Minister's office I introduced the Garda Síochána Act 2005 as part of the reorganisation of An Garda Síochána. However, we knew at that time it was very definitely only the first stage of a much more radical programme of reformation that was necessary. One of the things I remember being conscious of at the time was that the Garda districts and areas seemed to be based, in part, on old Royal Irish Constabulary, RIC, policing areas. Some of them were quite extraordinary. They crossed provincial boundaries and were about as logical as ancient Irish diocesan boundaries in some cases. Obviously, this cannot be the case. It is necessary to have groupings within An Garda Síochána where specialism can exist. With sexual offences and the like, it is necessary to have a cohort of gardaí available in any area of An Garda Síochána where there will be specialism and a teamwork approach, with opportunities for promotion within the specialisms of An Garda Síochána. Therefore, I fully support this legislation and I commend the Minister and the Garda Commissioner on proceeding with it.

I have no doubt that it will be unwelcome for some people because it will close off the number of chief superintendent posts and the like, which some people may think is a problem in terms of their career ladder or career ambitions, but this is a small State and we have to organise our resources properly. Even now when there is a record number of members of An Garda Síochána, it does not make sense to deploy them on the basis of a pattern of population distribution

that is a century out of date at this stage.

There is a second point I wish to raise. I am apprehensive that creating bigger areas creates a particular issue that we must address, and I am not against doing so. The issue that has to be considered is the relationship between An Garda Síochána and local communities. I will give the Minister an example. I was speaking to a shopkeeper some years ago in Rooskey, County Roscommon - I have a personal connection with that area - and he told me that on one occasion a number of people came into his premises and were bent on plundering it. He sought Garda protection and asked for an intervention from the gardaí in Carrick-on-Shannon, which is 12 or 15 miles away. He was told that he should contact the gardaí in Boyle in County Roscommon, which is another 15, 20 or perhaps 30 minutes north of Roscommon, if he wanted help. What I am saying about boundaries is that there has to be flexibility too. If something serious is going on in one district or if a person carrying on a business needs help urgently, these boundaries must be flexible. We cannot have a situation where somebody is told that he or she must contact somebody 30 or 40 miles away when the person is facing an emergency. The same would apply to domestic violence and many other things. We cannot have a situation where people are deprived of policing services by arbitrary lines drawn on maps. People are entitled to some flexibility in these matters.

The next thing I wish to raise is something on which I have to express a sense of disappointment. I touched on it this morning on the Order of Business in respect of the Defence Forces and voluntarism. An Garda Síochána is in danger of becoming isolated from local contact. If one is patrolling an area in rural Ireland or urban Ireland from a patrol car and if one is supposed to know who is who in the community and to have local intelligence, local contact and local support from the community, an ongoing permanent sense of relationship is required between those who police an area and those who are policed and protected by An Garda Síochána. It was with that in mind and with the very strong support of the Fine Gael Party at the time, and against some opposition, it must be said, that the concept of a Garda Reserve was included in the Garda Síochána Act. I have to tell the Minister, and she probably hears this quietly because there is a sense of loyalty among those reservists who have been effectively discarded, demobilised and left unused, that the current regime relating to the Garda Reserve is very unsatisfactory. I had the view that we should have reservists from Tallaght just as much as reservists from Rooskey - people who are in the area, who identify with the Garda and who people in the area felt they knew and could talk to as members of An Garda Síochána even if they were not on active duty as reservists.

I brought the media over to Chester in Wales to see how the reserve constables operated in England and Wales. They were a little shocked when they met an intensive care unit, ICU, nurse, a wonderful woman who in her spare time, as if she would have much spare time, was a reserve woman police constable. She believed in giving back even more to her community. I hope the current Garda Commissioner does not take this wrongly, but I think there is a slight danger that the idea of reserve policemen coming from north of the Border is slightly tainted in some people's minds as a problem rather than an opportunity. I implore the Minister to encourage the Garda Commissioner to complete his review and to reactivate the reservists. There are many men and women in Ireland who want to help, who want to be the local points of contact and who want to assist the Garda Síochána in their area, but they have been neglected and effectively made redundant. It is an insult to their patriotism that they are left in their current position.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. I thank the Minister for out-

lining the comprehensive, important and far-reaching aspects of the Bill before us. As the Minister said, it is presented as a technical Bill to implement a new Garda operating model. As colleagues in the House have acknowledged, and I am sure others will, it makes sense that an organisation as large and of such importance as An Garda Síochána would take the opportunity through the Department and this legislation to re-evaluate how it is functioning and operating in a modern context.

Set alongside the new model is the main aim, which is described as introducing structural changes to provide for more front-line gardaí, increase Garda visibility and ensure a wider range of policing services for local communities. The objectives of the Bill have been warmly welcomed in this Chamber and will be particularly welcome in communities across this State that are desperately in need of the support of An Garda Síochána to ward off violent criminals and prevent criminal acts.

The test that the Bill sets itself, and therefore the Garda, is a tall order in any set of circumstances. However, in circumstances of restructuring, there are serious concerns that the changes could lead to less Garda visibility and a loss of some resources in some rural areas that the force may have had. That was touched on by my colleague, Senator Gallagher. It is the responsibility of the leadership team of An Garda Síochána to ensure that the aim of front-line visibility is realised.

As colleagues have acknowledged, it is a good idea to introduce a drug-testing policy into the police service. It will bring An Garda Síochána into line with international best practice.

We are told the Bill must be passed without delay to meet the pilot scheme deadline. It might sound presumptuous but I would have expected its radical aims to be part of a considered, thoughtful and worked-out plan. As part of a worked-out plan, those officers in certain ranks facing a change in their status should be compensated appropriately and fairly. However, Sinn Féin supports this Bill on the grounds that the aims it is setting are worthy and beneficial to the people and the police service in the joint enterprise of making society safer for everyone except criminals.

Senator Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister to the House. It is good to see her back.

Like other Members, including Senator Gallagher, it is important to express my gratitude, and that of the communities I represent, to An Garda Síochána. It is important to pay tribute to those who put on the uniform and go out to protect our communities. They do so in the knowledge that they may not return home. Unfortunately, this has happened in the State over many years. It is important when talking about individual gardaí and the Garda that we all acknowledge the wonderful service they give to this country. That is acknowledged every time we speak in this House and, indeed, at every other opportunity we get.

I am very glad to have the opportunity to speak on the legislation before the House. As the Minister stated, it is part of a comprehensive reform agenda. It is a technical measure, we were told, but it represents a quite substantial change in itself. The stated intention of the Garda Síochána (Functions and Operational Areas) Bill 2021 is to facilitate the implementation of the new operating model planned by the Garda. The Bill proposes certain amendments to legislation to facilitate the introduction of changes to the structures of the Garda. These amendments primarily relate to the abolition of Garda districts and the reassignment of some of the functions performed by members of the Garda Síochána in Garda districts to other members in Garda

divisions.

As mentioned by colleagues, the Bill will see a number of new operating models in a structure around the Garda divisions. Under the divisional policing model being introduced, all services will be managed and co-ordinated at divisional level to allow greater specialisation and to release gardaí from back-office functions, which is what we all want to see. Garda districts will no longer form part of the organisational structure.

The new operating model, we are told, is currently operating on a pilot basis and is due to go live in September 2021. What we all want to see, which I am sure has been mentioned to me regularly and the Minister daily, is gardaí back on the streets. People want to see them back in their communities. I sincerely hope this Bill will result in more gardaí in communities.

Let me refer to the county in which I live, County Kildare. Under the new structures, the headquarters in the division where I live will be in Portlaoise, to cover the counties of Laois, Kildare and Offaly. While it may be asked why the headquarters are to be located in County Laois, which has a much smaller population than County Kildare, the bigger question for some time has concerned the number of gardaí per head of population in County Kildare. I, along with many other public representatives from Kildare, have raised this matter at every opportunity, most recently with Commissioner Harris at the annual joint policing committee meeting in County Kildare. According to the figures I have seen most recently, Kildare has the second lowest ratio of gardaí to members of the population, second only to the Minister's county, Meath. This is an historical issue, unfortunately. Simply put, it is not acceptable any more given the massive growth in the population in County Kildare and the Minister's county. We need more experienced gardaí to be transferred to, and based in, south Kildare, particularly in the stations of Athy and Newbridge. I believe that eight probationary gardaí have been deployed recently to Kildare. This is obviously very welcome but, given the growing issues in several towns in Kildare, we need experienced gardaí to work alongside them. We need to see gardaí back on the streets. That will deter those who want to engage in unlawful behaviour in our towns from doing so. It is what citizens are looking for. I hope that, in supporting this Bill, we are facilitating that. However, I need to call once more for the strengthening of the Garda force in south Kildare.

I want to raise the issue of joint policing committees with the Minister. As I understand it, the committees are to change owing to the restructuring. I have always found my joint policing committee to be an excellent forum. It gives an opportunity to discuss information and concerns with local gardaí. I have been contacted by a number of councillor colleagues who are questioning the changes. Perhaps in the Minister's response, she can give some further detail on what those changes will be and how they will affect us. The proposed reduction of the number of public representatives is a worry among many. I welcome the idea of having more community involvement. Our gardaí should be based in the community whenever possible. Local representatives are elected, however, and there is concern among them. The Minister, in her reply, might mention this matter.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): Before I call the next speaker, I must flag that we agreed during the Order of Business that we would adjourn this debate at 2 p.m. There are three more speakers and I am conscious of the need to let everyone contribute. I am sure the Minister would like to add a few words to wind up. I call Senator Martin but ask him to be conscious of time.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. It is always great to see her here. I am conscious of time and do not wish to repeat points made, only to concur with what I perceive to be a warm reception for reform. The force of law and order, An Garda Síochána, should be conscious that reform is being sought with the very best intention.

Lest we forget, an opportunity should not be let go without mentioning the fallen — the members of An Garda Síochána who lost their lives to protect the people of Ireland. There are so many. Their losses have touched every parish in Ireland. Although my family has been happily ensconced in County Kildare for many years, I am a native of Carrickmacross. Garda recruit Gary Sheehan went out in Ballinamore in 1983 to deal with a kidnapping and never came home, as did Private Patrick Kelly, a member of Óglaigh na hÉireann, who I understand bled to death. They were representing the people of Ireland. We cannot thank members of the Garda often enough. I know the Minister will agree with me. I am not digressing as it is a fundamental overriding point that the forces of law and order protect us and put themselves in harm's way to keep us safe.

Like the other speakers, I welcome the changes. The Bill would change the structure of An Garda Síochána, primarily by abolishing the Garda districts and reassigning some functions to other members in Garda divisions. The divisional policing model is intended to allow greater specialisation and to free up gardaí from administrative functions. That has to be welcomed. I feel at times that gardaí would love to see a greater presence on the streets because they act as a deterrent. I believe that if we could free them up even more from the administrative role — I am aware that this has started over many years — it would be welcomed.

Each division is to be headed by a superintendent with divisional responsibilities rather than local district responsibilities. In many respects, this is just bringing us up to speed in a more modernised way. In particular, I welcome the increased specialisation that will result from these changes. The Minister has indicated that this will improve the investigation of sexual crimes, domestic violence, cybercrime and economic crime. That has to be something that we would all warmly welcome and embrace. We are moving in line with international best practices, with responsibilities based on policy areas rather than geography. In particular we need this specialisation to target the increase in domestic violence that has occurred over the course of the pandemic. The provisional figures for 2021 indicate that gardaí responded to more than 48,000 domestic abuse incidents, which represents a 10% increase. Fortunately, the number of charges brought has also increased. Will the Minister outline exactly how the divisional system would help us to prosecute more perpetrators of domestic violence?

Naas is losing its divisional headquarters. I understand that the new divisional headquarters is geographically closer to Leinster House than Portlaoise. As Senator Wall said, there are citizens residing in the county of Kildare, which is two Dáil constituencies. I am not being parochial but the Minister is in the Chamber today. Will she reassure us that there will be no diminution? The representative bodies, the Garda Representative Association, GRA, and the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, AGSI, had some criticism of the proposed restructuring. I will be grateful if the Minister will assure us that the restructuring, especially where I live, will have no detrimental impact. As An Garda Síochána does such a good job with the resources available, will the Minister assure us that there will be no unintended consequence whereby it will be less resourced as a result? I hope the opposite will happen and that streamlining of the force will improve efficiencies. People in Kildare will have concerns and are entitled to those reassurances, as Senator Wall has also mentioned.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I welcome this as a technical Bill and a necessity. Listening to some of the commentary, I am chair of the drugs task force and gardaí always show off their fantastic resources. We reach out to them all the time in the community. Even when it is outside the community of our particular drugs task force and matters arise or in the wider area of my home constituency in Dublin South-Central, they are fantastic at intervening and responding. It is similar with the local policing forums. I commend them on that and take the opportunity to acknowledge that we have proceeds of crime and a flow back into the community that has been established as a desire and an outcome.

I ask for two things in that regard: first, in the context of supporting the local policing forums, that there be someone, even a shared person across a number of forums, a permanent administrator to liaise with that community, the local representatives and gardaí; and, second, that we put money behind the community crime impact assessment model of supporting families where there are drug deaths, coming in around that family in a very discreet way. It cannot be publicly talked about because it is so sensitive but much fantastic work is done on the ground. If we could direct the proceeds of crime moneys into communities for that purpose, it would be fantastic.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the Minister for being in the House. The Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors has expressed some concern about the move or the direction in which we are moving. We are clearly going to move inspectors from their supervisory role into a management role as we move into this. That is not their function. We need supervision on the ground using both our sergeants and inspectors. I ask the Minister to reconsider that particular part. I am under pressure for time and I also want to deal with Part 6 of the Bill, which deals with GSOC. There is some concern that some part of Part 6 may be unconstitutional. The Commissioner has made a submission to the Minister. The representative associations, certainly the GRA, are very much behind that submission. From that point of view I ask the Minister to adopt the Commissioner's submission. In regard to stakeholders, there is no mention of the GRA in the Bill in regard to the function or the position of the representative associations.

We had a reorganisation of the Defence Forces in 2012 and we are still living the horror of that. As we move through this Bill, amendments will be brought in on behalf of the representative associations, who are the people on the ground expected to implement the wishes of the Government. From that perspective I ask that we do not dismiss those amendments for the sake of dismissing them but that we go through them and, if they are to be ruled out, or if the Minister decides she cannot bring them in, that she provide a rationale and explain why she cannot accept amendments that are being brought in by the people who are on the ground. I will have plenty to say on Committee Stage.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Senator Craughwell. As there are no further speakers indicating I call on the Minister. I know it is a tall order.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank Senators for their questions and also for their support for this Bill. As I said at the outset, it is quite technical. At the same time it is an important Bill in making sure that the many changes that are taking place across An Garda Síochána and the restructuring are rooted in the law, that gardaí are supported and enabled to do their work and that it is as effective as possible.

Many of the concerns that Senators raised around the restructuring are that it would not im-

pact community and local work on the ground - for example, when Garda headquarters move. That is happening in my own county of Meath. We will have our headquarters in Westmeath. The clear intention of this restructuring is to meet a number of objectives. The local police on the ground will have more autonomy to make decisions where those decisions are specific to the area and localised. That is obviously what so many of us want, that it is more specialised. Already we have the divisional protective service units that have been rolled out in all of the divisions. That is clearly saying that we now have people who are trained and working solely on the area of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. It is important that we have it not just for that important issue but also in the areas of cybercrime and other areas that will probably move to more specialised units. It is also about getting people out from behind the desk and out on the ground. When we have so many districts we need a background team. To put it that way creates less work that needs to be done behind the scenes, freeing up more people to be out on the ground, which is obviously what we all want.

Many of the Senators touched on Garda numbers in general and the need to ensure that those numbers increase. Two weeks ago, 120 new gardaí came out of Templemore. With restrictions being lifted I am confident that the 800 that are resourced and committed to for this year will go through the process as well. I have spoken with the Garda Commissioner to make sure that we revitalise our Garda Reserve and increase those numbers as well. There are many things happening.

This is just one piece of legislation in a whole suite of measures. Senator Craughwell mentioned the Community Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill, which is quite a large Bill and is a priority in my Department. We are working on it at the moment and hope to have it published in this session. That in itself will implement a number of other changes.

Senator Wall touched on community safety and the JPCs. A core element of the other Bill is around the development of community safety partnerships that would replace the JPCs. The intention is not to take anything away from local councillors or the excellent work that is being done on the ground. It will bring together the local council, councillors, An Garda Síochána and entities such as Tusla, education, community groups and anybody involved in the community, where they can then come together and devise their own community safety plan for that area.

To touch on the last point made by Senator Seery Kearney on the funding and access to funding, a new fund has been established which will enable all communities through the community safety partnerships to apply for money that will essentially go to projects that they deem suitable for helping their areas, to keep young people safe and devise new programmes or projects, whatever it is they want to do. It is about making sure this is about police on the ground working in communities, working locally. This model will help to achieve that.

Of course, on this last point, any legislation has an actual built-in mechanism to be reviewed after 12 months. With the changes that are taking place we will all be working closely with the Garda Commissioner and where things are not working or where things need to change, that of course will be taken on board.

Question put and declared carried.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Seán Kyne: Dé Máirt seo chugainn.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 1 February 2022.

Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person (Amendment) (Stalking) Bill 2021: Committee Stage

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): In line with the Order of the House for today, we must be conscious that this Bill must conclude at 3 p.m.

SECTION 1

Senator Sharon Keogan: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 4, to delete lines 1 to 4 and substitute the following:

“(3) In this section ‘stalking behaviour’ means persistently engaging in one or more than one of the following:

(a) following, watching, pestering or communicating by any means of communication with or about a person;”.

This amendment moves the word “persistently” up one line from subsection 3(a) of the proposed new section 10A to be inserted into the principal Act in order that it applies to subsections 3(a) to 3(h) rather than just subsection 3(a). Subsection 3 deals with the definition of stalking behaviour and gives examples of what that behaviour can look like. The reason for this amendment is that the idea of stalking being an ongoing behaviour is only now found in subsections 3(a) and 3(c), which mention “persistently following” and “repeated, unwanted contact”, respectively. The idea behind the amendment is to avoid any possible instance of one-off actions falling under this legislation, which I do not believe is the intention of its proponent.

For example, subsection 3(b) offers an example of stalking behaviour as “purporting to be another person”. If I were to introduce myself as another person, such as the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, it would be unusual, impolite and puzzling, but I am not sure it would qualify as stalking behaviour. We can all appreciate the role that impersonation, particularly online, can play in stalking. My sole worry is that the current wording may criminalise individuals’ actions which are not, by default, stalking.

I appreciate that the phrase “repeated and unwanted behaviour” is in subsection 2(a) and that it might be enough to prevent one-off actions being unintentionally within the scope of the legislation. I tabled this amendment to give the proponent of the Bill an opportunity to clarify the interpretation of the legal effect of the Bill as it stands. If subsection 2(a) is sufficient to avoid the scenario I outlined, I am happy to withdraw my amendment.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I thank the Senator for her proposed amendment. She and I had a conversation about this matter earlier, and I understand what she was trying to achieve. I assure her, however, that subsection 2(a) adequately deals with the “repeated” behaviours

required. It is a similar word to “persistent”, so I am confident the Bill does what we need it to do, and I hope the Senator’s concerns have been allayed. The Bill was drafted in conjunction with Stalking Ireland and the co-founders of that organisation, Una Ring and Eve McDowell, and they are satisfied that it does what they need it to do. I hope this addresses the concerns raised by Senator Keogan.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I thank Senator Chambers. I honestly do not want us to have to come back to amend this legislation, as we had to do with the Children Act 2001. That is why I pointed out this potential issue. If the Senator is confident that what is in this legislation is adequate, I will withdraw my amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Section 1 agreed to.

Section 2 agreed to.

TITLE

Question proposed: “That the Title be the Title to the Bill.”

Senator Lisa Chambers: I would like to make some comments, if the Cathaoirleach will grant me some latitude.

An Cathaoirleach: Absolutely.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. This is a more positive experience than when we took Second Stage of this Bill last September. I am pleased to have brought this legislation to the House to make the offence of stalking a stand-alone crime in Irish law, which is currently not the case. Members will be aware from the contribution I made last September that I believe this Bill is necessary because the current law in this regard is inadequate and insufficient to cover the sinister and serious nature of stalking, as will be borne out by the many stories recounted by victims. It is my strong belief that the word “harassment” does not adequately cover what victims have recounted to me in their stories.

I again credit and pay tribute to the co-founders of Stalking Ireland, Una Ring and Eve McDowell, for their incredible work in bringing this legislation to where it is today. Only last year, they had to go through the ordeal of going to court and facing their attackers. Thankfully, both women got their day in court and the perpetrators are now behind bars. One could suggest that a longer term was warranted. In any event, we are where we are. Following that experience, the women put together a campaign to try to help other victims, draw attention to this crime and be the voice for many who have felt voiceless on this issue.

Throughout last year, we worked together to draft the legislation. At times, we pored over the wording and we are satisfied that it adequately covers the offence. We worked with Dr. Catherine O’Sullivan of University College Cork, UCC, and we also spoke to an adviser who had been with the Law Reform Commission. The Minister will be aware that the Law Reform Commission recommended in 2016 that we consider enacting a stand-alone offence of stalking. Our initial dealings with the Department of Justice were not very positive. Una and Eve have recounted being on many media outlets where statements were sent from the Department of Justice to say the legislation was not needed and that the harassment section was sufficient. Effectively, it was being stated that their campaign was not going to bear the fruit they wished

it to bear.

Thankfully, I continued working with Una Ring and Eve McDowell, and we persevered in this endeavour. We were committed to seeing this issue through to the end. In last September's debate, the Department's clearly stated position was that this legislation was not needed. After working on Coco's Law, and having consulted legal advisers and key stakeholders in the criminal justice system, I think the position was that they were all of the view that the harassment legislation was sufficient. It is good that there has been a change of mind, and I have no doubt the Minister played a key role in bringing about that change of mindset in her Department. I also have no doubt that recent tragic events have prompted that period of reflection. That has allowed us to examine our laws and the need to modernise and update them to protect women further.

It is also welcome that we are finally following the example set in other jurisdictions. Looking to those of our neighbours with the same common law judicial system, namely, Scotland, England and Wales, those jurisdictions criminalised stalking and made it a stand-alone criminal offence more than a decade ago. We had hard evidence to show that doing that led to increased reporting and more prosecutions, and the victims got the justice they deserved. With that evidence in hand, it is only right and proper that we move in the same direction.

I commend the Minister of Justice in Northern Ireland, Naomi Long MLA, who is bringing through legislation on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive to do the same thing there. I was pleased to meet her last year to discuss her plans to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK. It is also good that we are moving in tandem with that endeavour in order that we will have an all-island approach to this issue. I am sure the Minister and others will agree that if there were to be a different approach north and south of the Border, it would pose difficulties for those living in the Border region. I do not think I need to go into any further detail on that. I am sure the Minister and others will agree that if there were to be a different approach north and south of the Border, it would pose particular difficulties for those living in the Border region. I do not think I need to go into further detail on that.

I welcome the change of view from the Department and look forward to working with the Minister on bringing this legislation to a conclusion. I reiterate my strong and firm belief that a stand-alone offence of stalking is required. The reason and evidence for that is that by having a stand-alone offence, awareness is raised and the number of women, predominantly, who will come forward to report this crime will increase.

Enacting the law in this space is the first step. We need to make sure the law is effective and victims can access the justice system and get the justice they deserve. The Minister will be aware that Una Ring, for example, had a fantastic experience with An Garda Síochána and they were exemplary in the work they did. There is no doubt that had they not been outside her home on the night her attacker came, things could have been different. However, that is not the same for every victim. Eve McDowell had a different experience in Galway when she went to report her ordeal. There will need to be a process of upskilling and training for An Garda Síochána so they are fully briefed on the law we are about to enact and know how to deal with victims.

It is about very simple things. I was talking to a councillor about the need to have privacy when giving a statement on a matter this sensitive and for a special location in the Garda station to which victims can go in private to recount their stories. When a victim goes to report this crime, there should be some sort of continuity in terms of the garda he or she deals with. One

thing Eve found difficult was that every time she went to make a complaint and tell the gardaí what was happening to her, she spoke to a different garda. That can happen but it meant she had to retell her story over and over from the beginning. That retraumatises the individual.

We will need a suite of measures in terms of implementing the law, how it is to work in practice and the experience of victims. I respectfully suggest to the Minister that we pencil in a date two or three years down the line to review the operation of the law, how it is working for victims and how the justice system is working.

I relay the words of thanks from Una and Eve to all Members of this House for supporting the legislation, supporting me in bringing forward this Bill and showing the work the Seanad can do collectively on cross-party legislation like this. I thank the Minister for her understanding and for meeting with Una and Eve the last evening. They appreciated that engagement, as did I. I thank the Minister for committing to bringing through legislation to criminalise stalking. It will be a positive step and I look forward to concluding this Bill in two weeks' time, 9 February, when we will proceed to Report and Final Stages and pass this Private Members' Bill in the Seanad. I thank the Cathaoirleach for his latitude in allowing me to make a few remarks.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I commend my colleague, Senator Chambers, on her work on this issue, the depth of research she conducted and her steely determination to see this through. She knew there were two women who were wronged and was determined to see that through. I acknowledge her determination and that of the two ladies concerned who went through the system and then came forward in an effort to protect other women who may have been through the same process. We have to acknowledge their bravery in coming forward with an unselfish view to ensuring others will be protected.

While the Department initially may have been pushing back on this legislation, I am glad it has shown flexibility. I have no doubt the Minister was central to that flexibility and to coming forward and supporting this legislation. I hope that flexibility will be extended to a number of other areas, which I may discuss with the Minister on another day.

Today is a good day and a step forward. I commend Senator Chambers, the two ladies concerned for coming forward and the Minister, her Department and officials for advancing this Bill. Any legislation that gives added protection to the women of this country has to be explored, implemented and enforced to the last. I congratulate my colleague on this excellent legislation.

Senator Barry Ward: Ba mhaith liom a rá go gairid, gurb í seo an tslí gur ceart don Oireachtas a chuid oibre a dhéanamh. Ba chóir go mbeadh Billí ag teacht ó Sheanadóirí nó Theachtaí mar seo. Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh leis an Aire as éisteacht leis na Seanadóirí agus leis an ngrúpa. Ba chóir di é sin a dhéanamh agus tá a fhios agam go ndéanann sí é sin an t-am ar fad. Is maith an rud é go bhfuil Billí ag tosú sa Seanad agus ag dul tríd an Oireachtas le bheith ina Acht ag críochnaigh an phróisis.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I echo the sentiments expressed by previous speakers. It is a good day when we see Private Members' legislation go through the House having been accepted by the Government. It reinforces the importance of this House.

I commend my colleague, Senator Chambers, on all the work she has done to date. It results from her horror at hearing the stories put out by Una and Eve about their experiences. It is important that the victims of crime can highlight their situation and that we, as legislators,

respond to this shortcoming in our legal framework in order that their efforts do not go to waste and good legislation is passed and implemented.

As Senator Chambers pointed out, a number of steps will have to be put in place for the Garda in order that gardaí understand how the victims of this particular crime should be dealt with. This legislation is an important step on the road to solving the issue of violence against women in this country. It is only one step and many other steps need to be taken, but it is an important step. It recognises the seriousness of the crime. Stalking should not be ignored. It is a serious crime and has serious consequences for the victims thereof, but it can lead on to even more serious crime.

Well done to Senator Chambers. I thank the Minister for being open to this legislation and hope that more Private Members' Bills from this side of the House will pass with the approval of the Government.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Tá fáilte roimh an Aire. Cosúil le Seanadóirí eile, cuirim fáilte roimh an reachtaíocht ar an gcéim seo. I had intended just to echo the sentiments of support for this legislation and what it seeks to do but it struck me listening to Senator Chambers that I have a technical question, if that is in order. I hope it does not expose my ignorance in comparison to some of my more learned friends.

The Senator rightly mentioned the legislation going through the Assembly, led by the Minister of Justice there. It will allow for similar laws to be brought into effect. Will these Bills, when they become law, have the potential to run in parallel as opposed to overlapping and complementing each other? As Senator Chambers said, someone living in Cavan could be stalking somebody in Fermanagh and *vice versa*. If a woman or anyone else is being subject to this crime in the other jurisdiction, how should he or she report it? Should it be reported to the Garda or, if the person is in the North, the PSNI? How would that happen? Has the Department looked at that? If not, could it work through the auspices of the North-South Ministerial Council to engage with the Justice Minister, Naomi Long? On the back of today's debate, I will encourage her to do likewise.

The legislation is welcome. I support it and it will be effective. We need to make sure it is as effective as it can be. That is something we could look at as this Bill proceeds and goes through the Dáil as well. If the Minister does not have that information, maybe she can correspond with me.

Senator Mark Wall: I congratulate Senator Chambers on the vital legislation she has brought before us. I thank the Minister for her co-operation and work on the Bill. This sends out the message to Una and Eve that their voices were listened to through the work of Senator Chambers, which we are here to support. Unfortunately, due to circumstances, I cannot be around for statements on violence against women. I will, however, repeat what I said last week on the reproductive health Bill, namely, that this is the type of legislation we male politicians need to support and on which we need to co-operate with our female colleagues and work with the Minister. What happened in this country in the past two weeks has unfortunately brought this home to every one of us. We are here to do a job, namely, to legislate. I again thank Senator Chambers for this legislation and other legislation that will be brought together with it. I hope the House will support that legislation. We have a lot of work to do with regard to women's health. We are here to do it. I hope that co-operation, and the co-operation of the Minister, will continue into the future.

Senator Regina Doherty: I offer my thanks to Senator Chambers and to our Minister for Justice for taking this Bill. From my own experience as a Minister, I know that too often people are of the opinion that the only people who can draft legislation are the very learned people we deal with in the Attorney General's office. No Department or section of the Oireachtas has a monopoly on wisdom, compassion or passion for particular problems the country has. Here we have two women, the leader of the Fianna Fáil group in the Seanad, Senator Lisa Chambers, and our female Minister for Justice, who have both recognised in the last year and since their appointment that we have a serious problem in this country. We have a problem with addressing and acknowledging the lived experiences of women with regard to violent crime, sexual crime, intimidation and harassment and issues relating to access to medical services, equality of opportunity in the workplace and equal participation on boards around the country or at our own Cabinet table. There are myriad forms of discrimination and dysfunction to be seen in Irish services when it comes to providing a happy, balanced and fulfilled life for the women and girls of this country, something which is sadly lacking. Over this week and last week, the watershed moment of the awful tragedy of the passing of Ashling Murphy has allowed women to solidify what we have all thought in our minds but never really expressed out loud because we constantly get told to stop whingeing about stuff. The days of not being brave enough to be able to stand up and say what we need to say about every facet of life for Irish women are long gone.

I am really proud to see the co-operation involved in this Private Members' Bill, which was so passionately introduced, researched and drafted by Senator Chambers, supported by Una and Eve, last year. What we have heard is only a drop in the ocean as regards the experiences of the harassment and stalking of women that prevails in this country. The co-operation of the Department of Justice is heartening to see. I want to put that on the record and welcome the Minister's commitment to working with Senator Chambers.

What is also really important arising from that watershed moment of Ashling passing last week is that we do not lump everything in together. We must show women due respect and take each individual disenfranchisement of women in Irish life seriously. We must shine a light and provide a window to talk about each and every instance. It is about not just violent or sexual crime but all the other discrimination that women and girls face in this country, which we so often brush aside. After this watershed moment, we must all co-operate and maintain this conversation's momentum in the weeks and months ahead. The Minister knows that she has a mammoth task ahead of her. I really do wish her well with it. She will succeed and we will all succeed and benefit from her passion in this particular area, particularly in respect of gender-based violence. Women are disenfranchised and many of our State services are disengaged from allowing women and girls to have a full, balanced and happy life in this country. There is a long list of things that need to be addressed. This is a very welcome start. I commend Senator Chambers on doing this and on having the tenacity of personality to see it through to the end. I congratulate the Senator.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I join the rest of the Senators in congratulating Senator Chambers. This is a very significant day. We are all passionate about many topics but, on that day in September when we all spoke, there was an outcry. The Minister is showing that she listened to that and particularly to the voices of the women who have come forward, Una and Eve, and those of women all across the country. It is important to say that there are also men - and I know of some - who have experienced this kind of behaviour. It is also really important to mention that, in September, Senator Keogan spoke passionately here about her own experiences. That really struck a chord with many people around the country. It shows the importance of this

Chamber. As the Leader said, the Department is working with the Senator on a Private Members' Bill in order to find a solution we all want. That is the way it should work. It has been very positive. I do not believe that, back in September, we would have thought we would reach this point in this space of time. It is really very welcome. I thank all of those who were involved in the advocacy and Senator Chambers in particular.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Cathaoirleach for the chance to speak on this Bill. Obviously, I will not be opposing it on the next Stage. While there is undoubtedly work to be done on how best to implement the changes we are discussing here, Senator Chambers and I have a shared desire to see the law in this area strengthened, as do all of us in this House. We must do so as soon as possible in order that it can be a support and do what it is intended to do, which is to bring about justice for the many women who are impacted by this and for men, who are impacted by it to a lesser extent. I thank Senator Chambers for the work she has put into this Bill and this issue. I know she has done a great amount of work, not just in engaging with Eve and Una, but across the board to make sure that every issue is covered. In my own work since entering the Department of Justice, I have tried to prioritise domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and not only bring about new policies and introduce new laws, but also strengthen those we have. As was mentioned in a discussion we had here just previous to this debate, it is not always about creating new laws. It is often about strengthening the laws we have.

I am profoundly aware of the impact stalking can have on individuals. It is an extremely serious and intrusive crime. I am well aware of the psychological impact it can have because I have seen the impact it had on a very close friend of mine. I know what it can do to a person. It is devastating to see. I have been particularly struck by those who have spoken out, including those who have spoken out in this Chamber and in the Dáil. I particularly thank Eve McDowell and Una Ring, the co-founders of Stalking Ireland, who showed bravery both in recounting what happened to them and their personal stories and in pursuing their tireless campaign to bring this issue to the fore. With regard to the number of people they have supported, I do not believe they themselves expected so many people to come forward and contact them directly but people have contacted them and that is because of their work, what they have gone through and the fact that they have put themselves forward, which is never an easy thing to do. It is only by listening to the lived experience of victims and survivors of stalking and other offences of that kind and taking on board their experiences, good, bad or indifferent, that we can strengthen and improve our laws and make sure that the best system and structures are in place to support them.

I am particularly conscious of the evidence that shows that when a specific offence of stalking has been introduced in other areas, it has led to greater awareness of that crime. We also see an increase in the number of victims coming forward and the number of those who are guilty of these crimes being prosecuted. That is ultimately what we want. We want to create a system that allows victims to feel comfortable in coming forward and in which they know that they will be supported and protected the entire way through and that those with whom they come into contact will be able to support them in that way. Senator Chambers mentioned the need for training. That is a key element of Supporting a Victim's Journey, my plan in the Department to improve the criminal justice system. This will include training for members of An Garda Síochána separate from the training for those in the divisional protective service units that have been established throughout all of the new divisions. It also includes the legal professions, that is, solicitors and barristers, and the Judiciary, where we only recently saw moot courts and

training on the issue of sexual harassment, rape and sexual assault taking place. It is extremely important that, when people come forward, they know that the law is on their side and that they will be supported. The existing section 10 harassment offence covers stalking behaviour. We are speaking about strengthening the law. I encourage victims of stalking to report it. It has been and is prosecuted. Offences carry potential sentences of up to ten years. We recently increased this through the introduction of Coco's Law whereby it moved from seven to ten years. Perpetrators should not believe they can act with impunity and I want to make that clear. That is not to say the law cannot be improved. It can be and I am absolutely determined, as Senator Chambers and many others are, that it will be.

As I said, there is further work to be done on how we do it. I look forward to working with Senator Chambers, Eve, Una and others. There is an overlap between the existing harassment offence in section 10 and the proposed offence in the Bill. This creates a concern that perhaps there is a lack of clarity and certainty as to how a prosecution should be or could be conducted. Some conduct will potentially fall under one section or another but not necessarily both. It potentially creates a risk. This is something we need to work through and make sure that however we put forward proposals the law is clear. Whether it is An Garda Síochána, the DPP or the courts, we must make it as clear as we can.

There are other areas separate from the Bill itself, within which is the experience of Una and Eve, in particular. They are very clear they want their experience to be acknowledged in strengthening the law. There are other changes and recommendations I would like to make with regard to changes. We must make it clear that stalking occurs whether or not a victim is aware he or she is being stalked. This is not an academic point. We should not wait until serious harm occurs or somebody finds out when it is too late. It is very important that even though a person might not know he or she is being stalked it is an offence. It must also be made clear that impersonating a victim and communicating with a third party is illegal. We need to make sure our laws cover all forms of communication. We know things change and evolve and inevitably there will be more ways to engage with each other. The Bill also looks at introducing a provision whereby victims in very serious cases can apply to the court to prevent alleged perpetrators communicating with them in advance of a trial. There are many ways in which we can strengthen the law.

I thank Senator Chambers for her work in bringing forward the Bill. I look forward to working with her as it passes through the House and as we find a way to make sure that the existing law and the new offence of stalking are as clear and strong as possible in order that victims will know when coming forward that perpetrators will be prosecuted. At the end of the day this is about supporting victims and making sure they are very clear that when they come forward they will be supported and listened to and that those responsible will be brought to justice.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister for her help and co-operation and for that of the Department. I commend Senator Chambers and all those who have supported her and helped in this legislation. To outline how enormous a task it is for a Senator to have legislation passed, fewer than 20 Private Members' Bills by Senators have been passed in 100 years. Senator Chambers is truly joining an elite club and I congratulate her. It has been done only by pure persistence and the co-operation of all Members and, of course, the Minister and the Department. This important legislation needs to be passed. I commend the Senator on her relentless and tenacious effort. Without it this would not have been done.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill reported without amendment.

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

Senator Lisa Chambers: On Wednesday, 9 February 2022.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Report Stage ordered for Wednesday, 9 February 2022.

Sitting suspended at 2.35 p.m. and resumed at 3 p.m.

Violence Against Women: Statements

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, to the House for statements on violence against women. I thank the Minister for being here to discuss this very important topic.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The senseless killing of Ashling Murphy two weeks ago took a wonderful young woman from her family and from her wider community. It also led to an outpouring of grief the length and breadth of the country.

In thinking of Ashling, we also remember Urantsetseg Tserendorj, Jastine Valdez, Ana Kriégel, Nadine Lott and so many other women who have been, and are, victims of violence against women. As we grieved for Ashling, I believe that as a society we have also determined that we will no longer tolerate violence and abuse against women, and we all now share the same goal that there must be zero tolerance of violence against women.

The clear commitment from every person to do what it takes at an individual and a collective level, to work towards our aim of zero tolerance for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, shows that as a society we have indeed had enough. We, as political leaders, must lead on this, but there is no one thing we can do or no one law we can pass. No one group, no one organisation and no one policy will achieve this aim. This is a shared responsibility. Everyone has a role in creating a society free from all forms of violence against women. Everyone has a role in ensuring the focus and determination we have seen over the past fortnight is maintained.

As the Minister for Justice, my role will include overseeing the third national strategy to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and driving its implementation. This new plan will set an overall goal of zero tolerance in respect of violence and abuse against women. It will be based on the four key pillars of the Istanbul Convention: prevention; prosecution; protection; and policy co-ordination. Prevention in this context will, of course, include education and, as ever, education is absolutely key. We have programmes that work, and we must ensure they are implemented across our education system from primary to third level. Again, no one grouping has responsibility. That education must take place outside of the schools too, in our homes, our workplaces and where we socialise.

Over recent years, my Department has worked to raise awareness generally about how we, as a society, need to stop excusing unacceptable behaviour. Campaigns like No Excuses highlight our determination to challenge people and the culture, prejudice and values that allow

any form of sexual harassment or sexual violence. Our forthcoming programmes, such as the campaign on consent and healthy relationships, will continue raising these very difficult topics. We will keep working with society to change behaviours with a view to decreasing instances of sexual violence and to make sure that victims know what supports are available to them.

I will also continue working to reform our justice system to ensure that vulnerable victims are met with sensitivity, respect and professionalism on every step of their difficult and brave journey. The ongoing implementation of Supporting a Victim's Journey seeks to improve the criminal justice system at every single point a victim comes into contact with it, through actions such as training for gardaí, legal professionals and the Judiciary.

Protection also includes ensuring that when women take the difficult step to come forward, any supports they need are in place. That might be a refuge space, financial supports or health supports. It might be supporting more women to live safely in their homes if that is their choice. Whatever it is, we must ensure that those supports are there.

The new strategy will contain practical steps for the delivery of additional refuge spaces, for example. The strategy will be underpinned by clear actions, timelines for reform and robust accountability mechanisms. It will be resourced as it should be.

As part of the prosecution element, I will focus on strengthening legislation in this area. In the coming months, I will move to create a new criminal offence of non-fatal strangulation and, as we discussed in the House earlier, I will work with Senator Chambers and others to create a new criminal offence for stalking. Both offences are covered by existing law, but we want to ensure that the law is strong and clear. I want to encourage victims to come forward. We can do so by strengthening the law.

Later this year I will publish a new hate crime Bill that will introduce new, specific aggravated offences with enhanced penalties for crimes motivated by prejudice against certain characteristics, including gender. This will mean that certain types of crimes can be prosecuted as hate crimes where they are motivated by misogyny. I will also publish a new sexual offences Bill, which will introduce important changes including extending victim anonymity to further categories of victims, and legal representation for victims. I will shortly sign an order to bring into operation the Criminal Procedure Act 2021 allowing for pretrial hearings. This will, I hope, reduce delays in the trial process that might otherwise re-traumatise vulnerable victims.

Under the policy co-ordination pillar we will bring all our efforts together. At Government level, we will make sure that we are working with, and listening to, our partners who deliver services and work with victims on the front line. Our work will continue to be driven by their expertise and understanding. This will ensure we are more co-ordinated and more effective in our approach and our responses. Following consultation with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, it has been decided that the responsibility for policy and service provision for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence will be combined under the Department of Justice. Work is under way on how this will be structured, and the Taoiseach has already indicated that his office will also play a key role in this. We will announce further details in the coming weeks on how this will work.

This new strategy will be a living, breathing document. It will evolve and it will improve as we continue to live and learn from experience. An important part of that will be driven by the different viewpoints we hear, and particularly by the insights of victims and survivors. As I

said earlier, it is so important that in everything we do we listen to the lived experience, good, bad or indifferent.

As I noted earlier, everyone has a role to play in this work. Over the past fortnight we have clearly seen a desire for change. We have heard it in these Houses, we have heard it on the streets, and we have heard it on the airwaves. I know I speak for the vast majority of society when I say we have been deeply moved and troubled by the sometimes harrowing, and always affecting, stories and recollections of the personal experiences that have come from so many women of all ages and backgrounds, and, indeed, from so many women in this Chamber and in the Dáil.

While as a Government we are progressing and prioritising work in this area, we are of course ready to listen to any thoughts, ideas and recommendations from Members of this House. I will also conduct further consultation on the strategy in the weeks ahead. I encourage people to make their views known. It is absolutely clear to me that at present there is a focus, a determination and an absolute urgency in the work we are doing in this area. We must channel that carefully and strategically to get to where we want to be, which is a society that has zero tolerance for any kind of violence or abuse against women. I have said that this path to change will be long and difficult, which it will be, but I believe that by working together we can bring about change. Fear of harassment and violence should never be normalised and nobody should have to go about their daily life thinking about how they can keep themselves safe. It is simply not acceptable. By working together we can achieve that zero tolerance and we can bring about change for the better.

Senator Barry Ward: The Minister is welcome. In the first instance, I recognise her commitment to this issue. I am aware that she has advanced a number of policy initiatives and policies that put this at the centre of her term as Minister for Justice. I pay tribute to the fact that the Minister has put this front and centre and that she has shown a commitment to dealing with the issues as discussed in her speech.

It is undeniable that the Minister is a woman, and it is undeniable that when this debate comes up women flock to the Chamber to say what they have to say. Unfortunately, some of them have experience in this regard and they share that experience with us. We have had the experience in these Houses of women sharing appalling things with us.

To an extent, women are not at the core of this issue because the role for answering this issue lies with my sex, with men. All too often, male colleagues are unwilling to come here and to acknowledge the difficulties and the horrors of what it is we are talking about. In the aftermath of the conversations we have had in recent days and weeks, many men have come to me talk to me about this. Some of them have expressed how uncomfortable this conversation is for them. Some expressed not just discomfort but outrage at the extent of the conversation. One of them said that if a man does not support this kind of thing and does not in any way endorse violence against women or the kinds of behaviour we are talking about, then it should not trigger him and he should not be afraid of having this conversation. We should be willing to stand up and acknowledge the fact that in the vast majority of cases it is not women who are perpetrating violence against women, it is men. This does not mean that all men are bad and it does not mean that all men do it, but it does mean that all men must take responsibility. It means that when our friends, our sisters, our mothers or our colleagues who are female say something to us, we must listen and not dismiss it. We must not dismiss it and say that it will be grand or it is not that big a deal. It is that big a deal. If we did not know before Ashling Murphy's murder, we must

know now and we must have heard the countless examples of women affected by these issues. There is a spectrum from verbal harassment and psychological abuse to the appalling rapes and murders that we hear about in the media. Everything on that spectrum is wrong and needs to be treated seriously and to be dealt with by the State, of course, and by our laws, but also by men as members of society. We must accept responsibility to step in.

One of the things that was said in recent weeks was that men need to step in not just when they see something happening but when they see the genesis of something happening, such as sexist jokes, harassment, jibes and comments that are passed on unthinkingly. It is the responsibility of every man who cares about this issue and who accepts that it is an issue to interrupt that and to stand up and say that that is not okay. One does not have to make a big deal and embarrass people, but if a person feels they cannot say it there and then, they should take that person aside afterwards and say that that person cannot do that because even though that person may not understand it, it has a knock-on effect which is extraordinarily damaging.

We will undoubtedly hear harrowing accounts today from people who have had constituents or friends contact them, but whatever happens today I know in the first instance that the Minister is committed to this issue, and that gives me great solace because I already believe she has had some good wins in this. Even today we had progress with Senator Chambers's Bill being passed on Committee Stage.

We are making progress and I have confidence that we will make greater progress. Everyone of us has heard those stories from our friends who walk around at night with their keys held in a certain way or go on the phone in order that anyone around will think that they are talking to somebody, or get into a taxi and immediately call a friend to give the number of the taxi they are in, in case anything happens. To ignore these stories is as bad as to be involved. It is incumbent on us all to listen to them, to take them seriously and to help the Minister in whatever way we can to create an official as well as a personal response to those stories to ensure that every woman in Ireland feels the safety and security that she is entitled to, and that many of us as men feel already. We must also ensure that the envelope of security is both personal and official and that women can feel safe in Ireland again, as they always should have been able to do.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I thank the Minister for her statement today. I spoke after our recess about how the media coverage of the senseless murder of Ashling Murphy caused so many people to be aware of it and started so many national conversations around the treatment and experiences of women in this country. The flipside of this, of course, is that so often the long-term issues and the constant problems do not make the headlines yet these too must be part of the conversation. I do not think that we are experiencing an epidemic of male violence and that there has been a surge in violent gender-based crime. I am open to being wrong on that front; I simply have not seen the figures to that effect but I know that women suffer every day in this country. It is the case that this suffering will never make the headlines because of the simple fact that it goes unreported, unseen and unknown.

Domestic violence is one of the most horrific experiences that anyone can live through. To have one's own home, which should be a place of safety and peace, become a place of fear and tension goes against every sense of what is right and just. There will always be more work to be done in combating this crime and everyone has a role to play. Everyone should know the signs of possible abuse happening to friends or family members and they should not be afraid to contact An Garda.

For Government, funding is the bottom line. We have nine counties without crisis refuge centres for people fleeing domestic violence and that needs to be rectified. There was no dedicated line of funding in this year's budget for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. That must change. Services in this area must be maintained and developed and not depleted or damaged in any way. There should be a higher income threshold for free legal aid for those who require such aid to assist in cases against abusers. We need to facilitate women's escape from these situations and many women feel that they do not have the means to do so. As has been spoken about over these past few weeks, instances of violence like this do not exist in a vacuum. We need to ask what in our society and in our modern culture brings someone to the stage whereby this behaviour is displayed. What are the building blocks that lead to this?

At the end of the day we can get bogged down in attacking all sorts of facets of Irish society, from male sports to single-sex schools, but I believe that that is missing the point. Ultimately, it comes down to respect and to honour. These are two virtues which I feel have been sorely lacking for some time now in our culture. We can do a great deal by instilling a sense of respect in the inherent dignity of every person in our schools. Respect has to be much more a part of what is said at school during the day. Respect has to be part of every situation, every day, both in dealing with children and when children are dealing with one another. We cannot learn to give and show respect if we are not taught it, and schools have a very significant role to play in this. New programmes which deal with respect should be introduced to our schools, first explaining and showing the child what respect is, giving examples of it, and pointing out why this is called respect.

Programmes have to include strategies for dealing with inappropriate behaviour towards all people, regardless of gender. All the programmes in the world will be of severely limited use if their messages are being undermined at home. A child can hear respect in school but if they do not see it at home they will never live it out. How do we react in situations of upset, disagreement or dispute? How do we treat people with whom we disagree? Do we interrupt them, shout them down or refuse to listen to another point of view, as happens in this Chamber? Might we choose to honour, to show respect, to engage and, perhaps, to work through our differences to the betterment of all? I do not want to see the women of this country merely not being subjected to violence. I want to see them honoured and respected. That is not going to come through legislation, a citizens' assembly or a "Prime Time" investigation but will come about through the choices that each and every one of us make every day.

A public representative who had gone through the process with regard to violence has raised a number of issues with me about how we might make things better. She wanted to know if it was right that the victim's medical records should be available in a sexual offence or rape trial. Why is it that the victim of rape or sexual assault can have their privacy violated in such a manner but an offender, on release into the community, has a right to privacy regarding his address?

A "Do not disturb" sign on the meeting rooms in our Garda stations if a victim comes forward to make a complaint is another such suggestion. These are little things that we can change.

The victim should also be provided with a copy of their statement, as the accused gets to see it but the victim does not. There should be a clear explanation available to the victim at the Garda station outlining the process involved and legal advice should be provided from the outset. We have a long way to go to protect women and hopefully this is the start of it.

Senator Lisa Chambers: The Minister opened very well when she spoke about the very

tragic passing of Ashling Murphy and what that has done for our country in uniting all of us in the joint approach to tackle now the scourge of violence against women in this country.

There are many issues to be tackled, not alone in the legislation but also, as I mentioned earlier today, the wraparound services and how we deal with victims when they take that brave step to come forward. I raise directly with the Minister the experience of Councillor Deirdre Donnelly here in Dublin, who has gone public with her experience. She experienced a sexual assault and brought the case to An Garda and then on to the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP. Her experience of going to An Garda was not as good as it could have been. She was repeatedly interrupted while giving her statement. Senator Keogan's request for a "Do not disturb" sign on the door is a very logical and small thing that could be done which would make it a much more comfortable experience for the person coming forward, the complainant.

To have a consultation with the victim in order to give them a reason as to why, perhaps, the case may not progress could also be very important. Even though the evidential bar to be met is quite high, it does not mean that the victim has not suffered, and there is some work to be done there.

I welcome the Minister's comments around a zero-tolerance approach to violence against women but we need to put flesh on the bones there and to outline in greater detail what that actually looks like and means and how we are going to achieve it. It is a very aspirational point we want to get to and it will be a difficult thing to achieve but it is doable. It will take considerable work over many years to get to that point.

As I said, we need wraparound supports. We need to improve the education of our gardaí to deal with these very specific gender-based crimes. That is not at all to criticise An Garda in how it does its work but we are talking about a very specific set of crimes here, with predominantly female complainants. I believe there is an extra sensitivity in how we have to deal with these situations. We also need to improve the access to refuges around the country. A whole swathe of Ireland has no access to a refuge for women. When a woman makes that decision to leave, very often in the dark of night or when there is that little window to get out the door, if she does not have somewhere to go, it can be fatal. That is the level we are talking about. To not have a bed to bring her children to in a safe space is really just inexcusable in this day and age. It is a small amount of money. There should be a sense of urgency, particularly around that point, to get those refuges up and running. Every moment we talk about it, there is a woman looking for a space to go. Refuges are more likely to turn somebody away than take them in because of the pressures on that service.

The judicial system needs a complete overhaul in how victims move through that system. It is a well-known fact that approximately 5% of rape complaints actually end in a prosecution. We have much work to do there. That fact is so well known that it actually discourages victims from making a complaint because the biggest fear any woman has is that she will not be believed. When we look at the statistics, we can understand why a woman would think that.

If we really want to discourage these criminal offences and these types of gender-based crimes, we need to send a message to the potential perpetrators that if they do this, they will be prosecuted and serve their time. As it stands, however, a person would almost be unlucky to be convicted of raping somebody in this country because the prosecution figures are so low.

I will reference an experience of going through the court system. I will be mindful of the

constraints in this regard, a Chathaoirligh. The Belfast rape trial is a very well-known trial of an alleged sexual offence. I found it quite difficult to read about the way that trial was conducted, as I think many women did. If ever there was a judicial process that would send a message to any potential victim that this was a difficult road to go down, that was it. That particular trial, because it was so widely publicised, would have scared many potential victims from coming forward.

As the Minister said earlier when she spoke about the stalking Bill, we have a job of work to do to get the message out there that victims should come forward and report these crimes, and there will be support and they will be believed. In that particular case, there were references to the victim's past sexual history, what she was wearing on the night and what underwear she was wearing. That is completely irrelevant in my view. The purpose of that type of cross-examination is to tear the victim to shreds, discredit their character and undermine them as a person, and to try to speak directly to the jury and tell them they cannot believe this person because of the type of character they have. That is generally the defence that can be mounted in defence of a person accused of a sexual crime. I do not know exactly how we deal with that but I certainly think talking about a victim's underwear or what they were wearing on a night out is completely irrelevant.

There is also the possibility that access to a complainant's previous counselling history can be brought in as evidence. Again, that should be completely outlawed. That should not be allowed. A person should know that when they seek help, it should be kept confidential and private as with their medical information.

I realise I am completely out of time.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator may continue.

Senator Lisa Chambers: The education piece will be key. I know the Minister will have to work cross-departmentally with the Minister for Education on this. Much responsibility is placed on our teachers' shoulders in terms of how they are supposed to do everything at this particular age. It is really important at a young age, particularly when a person is coming into his or her teenage years, that we teach young boys, in particular, but also young girls about consent, bodily integrity and respect for one another. I am not sure that the current system that is in place in terms of educating young people is doing what it needs to do. Evidently, it is probably not.

I will conclude on those remarks. I wish the Minister well in her work. I have no doubt that we will have further robust debates in this House when she brings forward the plan from the Government.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I wish to begin today like many others by offering my deepest condolences to Ashling Murphy's family, friends and partner. As a woman, every time we hear another woman has been murdered, there is that wrenching feeling of horror and fear and then that is quickly followed by anger. The anger relates to the fact that we continue to live in a misogynistic society. While as a country we have come so far on so many issues, the reality is that we still have a long way to go to break the silence of violence against women.

Some 244 women have been murdered in Ireland since 1996 and 152 of them were killed in their own home, the place they are meant to be safe. Telling women what they need to do to be safe - download apps, carry rape alarms and legalise mace - not only misses the point but is also mentally exhausting for us. We know what we have to do because we have been doing it

since time immemorial. To be frankly honest, there is nothing more as women that we can do. It is well past time that we focus on the perpetrators and not the victims.

The sad reality is that due to the systemic nature of violence against women in society, girls learn at a very early age that the very fact that they are female brings additional risk to how they have to live their lives. I found out at the age of eight. I was alone on a school corridor at an after-school event and a man tapped on the window, called me over and proceeded to masturbate in front of me. To this day, that man's face is etched in my memory because that shatters your innocence. That was the first instance but it was certainly not the last.

I doubt that there is a woman in this Chamber who has not experienced sexual harassment or worse. Women are tired of telling their stories. What we want now is men in society to step up and be allies. Enough from the "not all men" brigade because the first death threat I received online was from a man who took offence to me saying that we should teach our boys not to rape. What we need now is for men to listen and learn, and not be defensive but receptive.

Alongside men needing to step up, so too does the political system. To tackle a problem, the first step we need to take is to realise the scale of that problem. We need better data on gender-based crime and a sexual violence survey. We need full implementation of the domestic homicide review. As others have said, having somewhere to go if one is experiencing domestic violence cannot be a postcode lottery. It is simply unacceptable that nine counties in this country have no refuge space for somebody who needs to escape. We need the domestic violence leave Bill that is being brought forward by Sinn Féin to be progressed and fully enforced.

In the time I have left, I wish to address something else. Those who seek to stir up racism or to exploit issues of violence against women whenever a woman is attacked need to stop it because unfortunately, all women know that male violence against women comes from men of all backgrounds, nationalities and ages. Unfortunately, misogyny is endemic in society. Likewise, I remind those who want to see an end to violence against women that this must also include protection for transgender women because feminism that excludes our trans sisters is not feminism.

I really hope that we have reached a tipping point in Ireland on violence against women and that we can finally move away from talking about ending violence against women to actually ending it. I hope we do not need to come in and share our stories but can now hand over and let men start to take control of the things they need to do to end this, to start to stand up and, as Senator Ward said earlier, to call it out when they see it. Then, we follow with the political actions that need to happen. I know there will be full support across the political spectrum for those actions because this has to stop. We have to break the cycle of violence against women.

Senator Annie Hoey: It is always difficult when you have to stand up and follow someone who has shared their experiences. I have been that person who shared my own experience here. I know how very difficult it is to stand up and talk about those things. They really, truly do not ever leave you and it is awful that the Senator had to do that. I thank her for taking a moment to share that with us. I certainly know that I am not alone in saying that it will give strength to other people to know they are also not alone. Sometimes when you have been a victim of something like this, you think you are alone. It is sometimes, unfortunately, incredibly useful to have people who can stand up and share their stories.

This afternoon, I am obviously thinking of Ashling Murphy and Urantsetseg Tserendorj,

who both died at the hands of male violence. I am also thinking of Agnieszka T who died in Poland because of state-sanctioned violence against women and the constant tirade against reproductive health, much like Savita Halappanavar died here in Ireland when she was refused access to an abortion.

In 2021, 375 transgender people were killed and 96% of these murders, which were recorded globally, were of transfeminine women. These women were murdered for living their own truth. They are not a statistic. The report authors state that 2021, a year when we had a global lockdown, there was a pandemic and everyone was home, was the deadliest year of violence against gender-diverse people since records began. It is a very worrying statistic.

All forms of violence against women, girls, transwomen, non-binary people and fem men needs to be called out. I want to spend a few moments speaking about calling it out. When we come together as a group of parliamentarians to discuss this issue, and this has not been the first time and it will probably not be the last time that we do so, it is usually in the wake of tragedy such as the loss of Ashling. We all know that while these extreme acts of violence are far too common they are not nearly as common as microaggression. In the wake of deaths such as these there tends to be a conversation about CCTV cameras, rape whistles, personal alarms, policing numbers, public lighting and all of these things. While I appreciate the well-meaning concern that comes with this, if we are serious about tackling gender-based violence we need to tackle these microaggressions and the acceptability in Irish society of degrading, subtle, passive sexism towards women.

We all know women who have experienced some form of male violence, violation, harassment or unwanted touching. Every woman in Ireland could speak about a time they were groped walking through a bar, about how they were cat-called when out for a run and about when they were spoken to in a demeaning, and often in an aggressive way, for not engaging with unwanted commentary from a man on their appearance. We have all been in the room when someone has made an off-colour joke or comment about rape, sexual consent or even domestic violence. Those jokes are still being bandied around the place. It is awful.

The question we need to ask is whether we called it out. Sometimes we put the pressure on women to call out these things. It has been highlighted in the Chamber that we need men to call this out. Calling it out has to be part of our day-to-day lives and an everyday practice. In the same way as it is not good enough to be just not racist and we have to be actively anti-racist, the same needs to be done for sexism. Every one of the small instances of sexism forms the basis on which the system of patriarchy, sexism and ultimately violence against women is built.

The Minister mentioned in her opening statement she will shortly bring into operation the Criminal Procedure Act allowing for pre-trial hearings so as to not re-traumatise victims. I am one of the people Senator Ward referenced as having stood up and shared my own story. I cannot emphasise how much the process of reporting sexual violence or rape retraumatises the victim again and again and again. I truly welcome the Minister's plan to introduce these pre-trial hearings. Under the patriarchy, which is still alive and kicking, we all suffer. The conversation today has been triggered by a senseless violent murder. If we continue to have national conversations only when exceptional events happen, we will continue to miss the daily occurrences of microaggression, violence, trauma, abuse and sexism.

I am tired of going to vigils for dead women. These women had lives that had value which we as a society failed to protect. I am tired of hearing stories from friends of nights out and

walking home and feeling so intimidated. I am tired of having to re-tell my own story in the hope it will give someone else the strength to come forward and have justice done for them. I get tired when women reach out to me looking for help to process their trauma to get help or to get out of a dangerous place because I am flailing around trying to help them in a system that I know is not fit for purpose for their needs. I want to live in a world where my body is my own and where I do not hear about a woman being murdered and think it could have been me, my sister or my best friend, and being grateful that it was not one of them. That is an awful thought that all women think when we hear about another woman being murdered. I want to live in a world where women experiencing sexual harassment is not the norm. Right now it is the norm. We cannot ignore the intersection of misogyny, racism, xenophobia and hate that are merging into a smelting pot of violence. Somehow, I do not know how we are going to do it, we have to break this cycle.

Senator Frances Black: I find the debate very moving and upsetting. It was very powerful listening to Senators Boylan and Hoey. I do not think there is a woman that has not been impacted, including myself. It is amazing how from a very young age we learn as young female children to protect ourselves. We have to. There is no other way about it. We have to learn to protect ourselves from when we are very young female children. I know today that even when I walk from my house to the shop I am scanning. We have to. Even during the daytime when I see somebody walking towards me I wonder whether it is a dangerous person, whether there will be a comment or whether I will be grabbed. It has happened to me, a good few times I might add, just because I am a woman. It is quite shocking to think that in this day and age we still have to have this conversation.

I offer my sincere and heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of Ashling Murphy. I mentioned this on the Order of Business. I cannot imagine it, and nobody can. The whole country seems to be in mourning for that young woman. I also express my condolences to the family and friends of all the women who have died needlessly and violently at the hands of men in Ireland. The murder of Ashling was heartbreaking but, as we all know, it is not an isolated incident. It is a watershed moment in Irish history when at last we will collectively say enough is enough. It is very sad to say it takes the death of a beautiful young woman with her whole life ahead of her to bring about societal change but it is better that a tragedy brings about a positive change for the greater good and there is no doubt about that.

I want to mention a few figures released this week by An Garda Síochána. I am sure the Minister is aware of them but I want them on the record. The Garda responded to 48,400 incidents of domestic abuse in the past year alone. This is unbelievable. There was a 10% increase in the number of instances in 2020. This week, RTÉ reported that a women's refuge in Waterford city has seen a 134% increase in calls to its 24-hour helpline since the onset of the pandemic. The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre believes 90% of victims do not report. Despite the increased levels of awareness about domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in recent years, the incidence rate continues to increase. It is time to take a look at the efforts we have made as a society to address the issue of gender-based violence. Our strategies continually fail the women of this country.

I could go on as I have a big speech to make but I am very conscious that today we are looking for answers. We are looking for answers as to how we can change this societal pandemic upon us with regard to sexual violence against women. What can we do? I have a few suggestions. I am not even sure they will help. Providing funding for services that work with women experiencing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is vital. We have to do this.

We must ensure the criminal justice system works fairly and equitably for women. Some of our colleagues have mentioned simple measures such as putting a “do not disturb” sign on the door. For God’s sake is this not just respect and dignity? It is bad enough having been assaulted but then to have to go in and speak to the Garda with people coming in and out of the room is like being abused again. It is vital that progressive public education campaigns are devised to ensure women are treated with the respect and dignity that we deserve.

I know this will all be little consolation to Ashling Murphy’s family and friends. We have to ensure her death did not occur in vain. Let their loss be the wake-up call our country so desperately needs so that no other family is forced to contend with the grief of losing their daughter in such a violent and senseless way. All I can say to the family is ar dheis Dé go raibh a h-anam. Please let us start today. Hopefully this is the beginning of something whereby we can make a change in the country to deal with violence. There is not a woman in the country who has not been impacted in some way. I am telling the Minister that. All my women friends have been impacted in some way. I thank the Minister today for calling for this debate. I thank her for her work. I know she is very passionate about this issue.

Senator Erin McGreehan: The Minister is very welcome back to the Chamber for this debate on another important issue. I thank her for accepting the anti-stalking Bill that was brought through the House in the previous session.

This is no country for women, and that is shameful. I find it hard to have these contradictions in my head and heart. I love this country. I am so proud to be Irish, and to be living in a modern European democracy. I am happy to be bringing my children up in this country. On the other hand, however, I have an overwhelming sense of being continuously let down and made angry by the state of things. We have let down our daughters, our friends, our sisters, our mothers.

The Constitution puts us at home. Our country and society put unmarried, pregnant women into institutions. Our church isolated women, persecuted them, shamed them and even said we were unclean after having children. Our schools still do not educate or empower us to do what is right or wrong when it comes to sex and consent. Our healthcare system does not adequately listen to the needs of women. Much of what happens to women is blamed on us. We are just told that is our lot. Our justice system is broken. We do not look after victims. The Minister spoke very passionately earlier about listening to victims and looking after them. I hope she will do that when it comes to reforming the way sexual assaults are dealt with in the legal system. Gardaí need training. They need to be there for girls and women to protect them and their dignity, not to shame them and make them feel like something is their fault. As a people, we must grow up.

I again pass on my deepest condolences to the family of Ashling Murphy on her death, which has rightly given rise to anger. I hope that people - men, the State, Departments - are listening to that anger. Let us remember all the women in Ireland and across the world who have been murdered. We stand for them. We also stand for the woman who is afraid for her life right now, who is afraid to walk down a street, who is afraid to go home tonight because the man in her life is going to strike and hurt her even more than usual. We cannot let down another woman like the young woman who wrote to me today. These are her words:

As a young woman, gender violence is a very important aspect of my life. When I was 20, I was sexually assaulted and raped. The director of public prosecutions decided

there was not enough evidence to press charges on the persecutor as it would be ‘my word against his’. They also believed that because I had agreed to go on a date with this person, I wouldn’t be looked upon favourably as a ‘victim’. No support is given when a women goes through this either and if there is, there is a lack of it. You have to use your own finances to seek cbt or therapy. This creates shame around victims of abuse too.

That is a recent case. The woman is still young. This is both embarrassing and a really sad indictment of the current system we operate. We will not change until we act on the Minister’s lovely sound bite about zero tolerance. We must act on that and put the laws in place. If the laws are not bringing convictions, then they are not working. If the system does not make bringing complaints accessible and make it a safe place to report crime, then it is not working and needs to change. It is a small thing for us to ask to feel safe and to be safe. It is also a small thing to ask for perpetrators of violence to be punished for it. One would think it is a small ask, but it is the biggest ask of our time and of the Government.

I do not want young girls accepting the sexual assaults that I accepted as a young woman. I refer to being sexually assaulted and having to walk off laughing because if you did not laugh, you were no craic and you were abused even more. On one hand, the Government is talking this up and saying we will have zero tolerance, yet when we were faced with it head-on this week with the Women of Honour, who are women of honour, we were let down by the system and told that a system is being put in place. Again, it is a case of the victims being ignored and going with the system. It seems to always be the system and this must change.

I want safe streets. I want my sons to be reared in a country that does not accept this ignorance and sexual violence as a day-to-day norm. I do not want my nieces and the daughters of friends growing up looking behind them. I curse the country that makes me look behind me constantly when I go out alone. I curse the people who have done this to me, to all the women in this room and to all the young girls we have to face head-on now. It is up to us to change.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: We have listened to many personal testimonies. It is fair to say that as women we have all experienced violence in our lives. It is incredible that we can all say that we have been a victim of violence. That is a really stark statistic - that half the population have been victims, yet it is almost seen as something acceptable. I am pleased we are having this debate, on foot of the murder of a lovely young woman, but, unfortunately, there have been many lovely young women, and middle-aged women and older women, killed in this country. It is unfortunate that it has taken this event to get us to have this debate. If I were to stand here and read out the names of all the victims, I would use up all my time and probably go beyond it because, unfortunately, there have been too many women dying in this country at the hands of male violence in recent years.

I give my heartfelt condolences to the family of Ashling Murphy on the awful trauma her community is going through - to think that a woman was out in the middle of the day minding her own business and something horrendous befell her. There is a trauma in that community and across the country.

I am pleased that we are going to get a whole-of-government approach because violence against women is endemic in society. We have all been subjected to demeaning and degrading language, sexist attitudes, microaggression and casual sexual assaults daily, as Senator McGreehan outlined. To my shame, I could list ten or 12 instances of casual sexual assault that I have put up with, and did not feel I had the ability as a teenager or young woman in my 20s to speak

up about. We cannot tolerate this any longer for young women. Senator Boylan outlined a very distressing incident that happened to her when she was a child, which reminded me of something. There was a flasher near our local school and on the way from our all-girls school to the bus we had to pass by this guy who flashed us all. It was a daily occurrence. Everyone thought it was a bit of craic, but it was not. I had forgotten it until Senator Boylan mentioned something similar. It was nearly that ordinary that it could be forgotten.

We need to be able to call out every bit of sexism as we see it and not be accused of not being able to take a joke, not being a bit of craic or being too politically correct or too woke. We need to start addressing it because all of this leads to the tragic incidences that we have seen. We are not anti-men. We all love men. We all have supportive male influences in our lives but, unfortunately, there is a toxic masculinity in Irish society that needs to be addressed. The patriarchy has allowed this to build up over generations and we are going to have to do something major to break up this intergenerational patriarchy. A comprehensive, up-to-date sexual education programme is needed. I want to home in on domestic violence, which is something I have spoken about in this House on many occasions. In my previous life as a solicitor, I represented many victims of domestic violence. Women of all backgrounds and in all communities experience domestic violence. There is a very high rate of women dying at the hands of an intimate partner in society, and that needs to be tackled in a comprehensive fashion.

The Minister said she is going to take some suggestions from the House. I have some suggestions to make. The civil legal aid system is completely broken.

There have been calls by Free Legal Advice Centres, FLAC, and other civil society groups to reform the civil legal aid system from top to bottom. I would like the Minister to undertake a comprehensive review of that. In tandem with that, the civil legal aid system in family law and domestic violence matters relies on the private practitioners panel. During
4 o'clock the most recent recession the fees paid were cut down to a low level. As a result, now, if a woman goes that step, qualifies for legal aid, brings an application in the District Court, gets her legal aid certificate and then goes to look for a solicitor, she cannot find any legal representation because the fees have not increased at all. There is maybe a lack of political will to touch the legal aid figures, the fees paid, but this is having a direct impact. There are swathes of this country where women cannot get legal representation to seek a barring order or safety order.

The court infrastructure is woefully inadequate to deal with any family law matters. I am glad to see that construction has finally started on the big hole on Hammond Lane. Again, I have been raising that for years in this House. While it is a progressive step, our courts infrastructure around the country is completely inadequate. Victims of domestic violence who are up against the perpetrators have to stand next to them in a crowded hallway. They are not able to consult their solicitor in privacy.

We need a State-run central maintenance collections agency. The State requires women who are in receipt of the one-parent family payment to seek maintenance from the fathers of their children. Then, when they get their maintenance order in the District Court, there may be somebody who is financially abusive, controlling and not paying over the maintenance. It is then up to them, the victim, to go perpetually chasing the perpetrator of violence to address this financial abuse. That should not be the way. Every other European country has a central maintenance collection agency. The lack of such an agency is allowing perpetrators to continually abuse and financially control women.

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I have many other points to make, although I see that my time is up. However, I will be in correspondence with the Minister, because there are a number of practical and important steps that we can take as a State. We can come in here and talk, but unless there is action, it will be pointless.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister for taking this debate. In preparing a few words for today, I want to open with a quote from someone I much admire, a former abbot general of Glenstal Abbey, Mark Patrick Hederman. I think it is apt and appropriate for today's debate. He states:

When we as citizens have courage, that does not mean we have the means. But it does mean that we can stand up for ourselves. And then the Government have to follow on. I don't think the Government does anything really creatively, until they have to do it by the law of necessity. It is only with necessity that the law changes.

That is profound and that represents public opinion and public power. I took time the other morning. I chose to come in at 6.30 a.m., as it became dark into light on Kildare Street outside Leinster House. I read the messages of the public and the many hundreds of candles and I saw the bouquets and flowers of sympathy. This was a national response to a crisis that we all have known about for so long. There were simple messages that called out for Government action and Government change and asked when the Government will respond. They stated, "I have cried too much" and "Stop". Moving tributes and candles were laid on the footpath leading to our Parliament. We were all deeply moved. I met other politicians heading home some evenings who were out there looking at them.

The appalling and tragic death of Ashling Murphy has produced a groundswell of support to bring about change. I am confident that the Minister will lead that change. I have no doubt about that. I have observed her, I have followed her and I have heard commentary about her. However, I have made a decision and a call that I think that she is best placed and she is absolutely committed as a woman, a citizen and the country's Minister for Justice in the right place at the right time to lead that change and to respond to the call.

We must listen to the victims of gender-based violence. The Minister said that earlier. I picked up on the line: "We must listen to the victims of gender-based violence." Gender-based violence is deeply rooted, as we all know, in gender inequality and continues to be one of the most notable human rights violations within all societies. Gender-based violence is violence against a person because of their gender. Both women and men experience gender-based violence, which comes in many forms. While people have rightly articulated this about women, I know many men and boys who have experienced gender-based violence, hate speech, crime and abuse, not only out in society but in their family homes and in State institutions. We must recognise that in this debate. Abuse comes in many forms, including physical, sexual and mental. It includes threats of such acts as coercive control and deprivation of liberty. I want to take this particular moment to single out Deputy Carroll MacNeill from my constituency of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and the Minister's party colleague, who has done a lot of work on coercive control. It is important that she has led on that. It is important that politicians lead on it.

I want to share a simple matter that was in my local paper, *The Southside People*, on 21 January 2022. It states:

Dear Editor,

Ashling Murphy's death is yet another horrific manifestation of the growing epidemic of violence against women in Ireland, in both the private and the public domain. This young woman was going about her legitimate routine daily business with every reason to expect that she would arrive home safely. There are no circumstances in which the deflection tactics of blame and personal responsibility can be used to justify the continued harbouring of misogyny, violence and femicide in our communities. It is incumbent on all of us to be outraged at the escalating social and cultural assault on women's safety; the paralysis of communities to be able to respond, and the resistance of political actors to confront and resource the elimination of violence against women.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Mc Dermot,

CEO of Safe Ireland.

I will finish by noting that Arup consultants last year published a report called *Travelling in a Woman's Shoes*. I urge the Minister to look at this as part of her deliberations. It spoke about horrific experiences but, more importantly, it gave facts and data and challenged us to change in that area. I ask the Minister to give special attention to the documents as part of her deliberations. I have every confidence in the Minister. She is the right person at the right time in the right place to lead a national response to this issue.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: The Minister is very welcome to the House. Everything in this country feels like a fight for women. This is not a fight that we should have to fight alone, but it often feels like we are. I know that men are there walking with us sometimes, but it always feels that we have to ask them to do so. It also feels that we ask Governments continuously to take action, as well as schools and society more generally. There are pockets of things going right, such as inter-agency responses such as the Barnabus in Galway, which deals with sexual assault against children. That will be replicated around the country. However, it is beyond time for a national response on this. The programme for Government was the first time that "epidemic" was ever used to describe domestic violence and violence against women, but we are a couple of years on now. There is a list of legislation that the Minister is progressing on stalking, which we spoke about earlier. However, it also felt like a battle to get to this point on that. It took the death of Savita Halappanavar to bring us to the place that we are waiting in respect of abortion but we are still fighting. I see there has now been a death in Poland, which Senator Hoey mentioned, of Agnieszka T., again relating to abortion. When something seems to be fixed in one place, it seems to pop up somewhere else around the world. We have obligations here in that respect as well.

Much of the discussion about this subject must involve talking about Ashling Murphy because what happened has hit us all deeply. I think of her family all the time. I also think of the families of the 244 women killed in recent years. What must this be bringing up for the members of their families? Along with those 244 women, 18 children were killed alongside their mothers. This has an impact on whole communities. We should not even have to say that because each woman is an individual and we should act before each death happens. That is simply not happening to the extent that it should be happening.

Quite rightly, we talk a great deal about domestic violence. I wholeheartedly agree with

Senator Clifford-Lee regarding maintenance and having a central collection point for maintenance payments. I know women, as I am sure the Minister does, who had to go back into court seven times. Eventually, they just give up. This issue derives from our long legacy of shaming lone-parent families and those who are unmarried or divorced. Why has action not been taken before now to deal with this issue? Nobody should have to be an advocate 24-7 for their own rights.

I agree with everyone who has spoken. Every woman here has, I would say, experienced incidents where they were victims. Not everybody wants to talk about it and not everybody in society should have to talk about it. Their rights should be enshrined in law and action should be taken anyway. The statistics show that a quarter of women have experienced violence, but I think it has gone much beyond that. When I was a member of Galway County Council, it was not even stated in the joint policing committee report how many incidents there were of sexual assaults, for example, until I raised it. Decades, if not generations later, we must still ask people if they have thought about the fact that women are experiencing crimes being perpetrated against them every day.

I return to the point about the children because it is critical. We talk about education a great deal, but in every school and every circle of friends, children are talking about Ashling Murphy. Children simply do not have the tools to be able to figure out what is going on in their society. I think of my daughter who came back from school and asked me about Ashling Murphy and the event I attended with a candle. I am not fully confident about the teaching of consent, not just in my daughter's school but in my son's school as well. These are the future actors. I will not say victims because we must be careful to say that people are victims for the time when something has been perpetrated against them. After that, they are not. We are ensuring, through our justice system, that people are being retraumatised and brought back to that place of victimhood over and over. Every time we hear about a death, it is also happening to us.

Some good things are happening. The legislation being introduced by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy Roderic O'Gorman, providing for time off in cases of domestic violence is a good thing, even though it should not be needed in the first place because nobody should have to take time off for this reason. I refer as well to all the legislation the Minister for Justice has undertaken to deliver. We also have our new Joint Committee on Gender Equality, which many of us sit on, and we will be examining this issue and ensuring that progress is made. That is our role.

An Cathaoirleach: Members will be aware that I am allowing the clock to run over because people have valuable contributions to make and I do not want to cut people off for the want of time. I hope the Minister understands. I call Senator Dooley.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I also wish to be associated with the expressions of condolence to the Murphy family and Ashling's boyfriend, Ryan Casey, on what is a tragedy for all of them and their community. No words spoken here will bring any comfort to them. It is important that we mark this tragic event because it has brought about an outpouring of sympathy and grief and resolve to sort things out across the State.

Much has been said in the past fortnight about violence, particularly physical and sexual violence against women. We have heard the many personal stories of women who regularly feel afraid for their safety. We have heard their testimonies of events and attacks perpetrated on women by men. We have heard personal stories again today from those who have been brave,

and I thank them for that. We have also heard of the impact this has had on women. We have heard how it has affected their confidence and ability to travel freely, socialise and live life as they want. We have heard the stories of women who feel that the criminal justice system has let them down and that the perpetrators of violent acts have escaped justice.

We must respond. I welcome the Minister for Justice's clear statement that she intends to do so with comprehensive legislation. We must build on that undertaking, however. I also recognise what Senator Chambers has done with the publication of legislation to address the crime of stalking. That is dealing with the extreme, and the extreme is serious, but there is so much more below the waterline that is often not discussed. We must take a much broader look at our society. Men must take a long hard look at our behaviour, views and ideas and at how we treat women. We must do that not just in our families and homes, but also concerning how we treat women in general, in the workplace and right across society.

If I hear another man give the impression that he fully understands the scale of the problem because he has a mother, a wife, a sister or a girlfriend, I will scream. To the best of my knowledge, no man in existence anywhere on Earth who has perpetrated the most heinous crimes on women was not born from a woman. Enough lads, enough. Such statements signify nothing.

Senator Lynn Boylan: Hear, hear.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Hear, hear.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I also do not want to hear it said that it is not all men. Of course it is not all men who reach a point where they rape, murder or plunder the rights of women, but an awful lot of women are undermined by men every day. A culture of misogyny is endemic in our society, sadly. Whatever its origins, and we all have a fair idea of where it comes from and how it has been allowed to continue, it is there. We can expect the Government to do the devil and all, and I have no doubt that it will, but unless men take responsibility in addressing this culture of misogyny, we will be going nowhere.

The other night, I watched a powerful investigative programme RTE did on the Kerry babies case. I would like to think we have moved a long way from that time, but we still have a culture of misogyny. It is beyond belief what was done to that woman. That it took 20 years for the State to address it is equally harrowing. At least the State did, eventually, face up to its responsibilities to the family in question.

I spoke during the week to a woman friend of mine who happens to be a solicitor. She relayed a story to me of a male colleague who during a professional negotiation, and this was just in the last week, asked her why she was being so feisty. It was polite language perhaps, but the message being conveyed by that man to his woman colleague was direct. To her, it was interpreted as "Calm down, you hysterical little woman". That happened between two professionals last week. Fair play to her because she retorted by asking if he would say that to a man. We all know the answer. He would probably get decked if he did. Why is a woman who is forthright and stands up for her position, or that of her client, described as "hysterical"? If a man stands up for his client in that way, he is described as "solid" and told "well done" and that he did right. Women are undermined every day of the week in the workplace for no reason other than their gender. A man would not do that to another man because he would not get away with it and we know why.

It is often said that women should take it on the chin and get on with their job but they should

not. They should not be asked to take it on the chin. Men would not be asked to do so and this needs to be called out. A former county council employee shared a story with me last week relating to a female former colleague of his who believed she was being bullied in the course of her work by a male who was, at the time, an elected member of the council. She followed the proper procedure and made a complaint but the councillor was never brought to book or held to account. He lawyered up and defended himself and it seems the internal procedures were not strong enough to deal with the situation because he was not an employee of the council. The view of the person who shared the story with me was that, if it had been a man, the councillor would not have got away with it and would not have tried his hand in the first instance. He was trying to advance the case for some particular issue he was involved in but the woman felt she was bullied just for doing her job.

When other women in the workplace see that concerns are not being taken seriously, it further undermines their self-confidence. We need to resolve that because women cannot be made feel they are not being taken seriously and cannot expect a positive outcome when they are being bullied or harassed in discharging their duties in the workplace. I wish the Minister well in the work she is doing, but it can only be a signal. Legislation from the Government cannot solve this problem. It is up to men in society to do right by women they see being undermined and abused in a sinister way by other men and to call that out. We cannot stand idly by any longer.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank my colleague, Senator Maria Byrne, for giving me her place in this debate and waiting until later to speak to allow me to go to see Gabriel Byrne in the Gaiety Theatre. My wife has come up to go to that show so I cannot reasonably avoid the appointment.

I welcome the Minister to the House. I am very happy with the fact that she has unequivocally stated that there will be a policy of zero tolerance. It is the unanimous view of this House that that is how it should be. The Minister will lead on that. In light of her record, I am convinced that will be the case. It is very important.

As the last speaker very eloquently testified - I did not hear the others but I heard him - any form of verbal or physical abuse, any type of violence towards women and any abuse of any description is, of course, wrong. It is violence. It undermines the confidence of the woman in question. In some instances, women who are less confident or not as experienced may be socially knocked out by it and not go to social events afterwards as a consequence. They may become very introverted. It is horrendous. The very recent tragic death, the murder, in Tullamore is the extreme form of this. That is what has brought this whole debate into focus but anything that can be classified as violence towards women is wrong and we should have zero tolerance for it.

I am happy that the four pillars of the Istanbul Convention, to which Ireland is a signatory, are being adopted here in that the Minister will look to prevention, protection, prosecution and policy co-ordination. I will make reference to a few of these pillars in the time I have. With regard to prevention, as a former teacher and as a parent, I believe we need a strong relationships and sexuality education programme in every school. One of the first steps the Minister should take with regard to co-ordination should be to talk to the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, to establish what is present in the schools now and to see how it could be augmented, made better and delivered to every child in the country. That is a basic priority. There should be co-ordination with parents through parents' associations and information from the schools in

order that there is follow-up in the home. As a parent, I get that. It is no good for this to be done in isolation. The same set of values should permeate the home and be reflected there. Children learn good and bad practices from the relationships they witness within the home. That places a great responsibility on parents, whether single parents or couples, to do the right thing, to be seen to do the right thing and to create the right atmosphere. That is very much in the area of prevention and it is necessary.

Protection is obviously important. In her summary later, will the Minister comment on the number of refuge centres and on what she proposes to do to ensure we have an adequate number of refuge places for women who are victims of domestic violence? What does she propose to do with regard to providing care for their children in order that they have a support system in the interim that is more than just a physical room and that will allow them to transition to some sort of a normal life outside of their dreadful experience at home? That is in the area of protection.

With regard to prosecution, of course, there should be zero tolerance. There should be no equivocation there. There should be prosecutions. It is unfortunate that human nature is such that we will not achieve these aims by exhortation.

Policy co-ordination in our actions is very important. That involves getting the Department of Health and the social welfare system involved. A unitary and holistic approach is required to ensure that women are supported when they are the victims of violence and that they are helped and get psychological services. Will the Minister comment on the support services she envisages for a woman who is a victim as she establishes herself back into life?

I am very grateful to my colleague, Senator Maria Byrne, and I thank the Cathaoirleach for taking me out of turn. In deference to that, I will not go on, but it is incumbent on every man to stand up today and be unequivocal that there can be no tolerance here.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Cuirim fáilte ar ais roimh an Aire. I thank the Minister for her time. I know it has been a long afternoon for her but I also know how significant and important all of these issues are to her and how willing she is to be here to engage with us in the Seanad.

The national outpouring of grief, sympathy and support following the murder of Ashling Murphy did not just reflect anger and shock at that appalling murder but also highlighted the awareness that there is something deeply and fundamentally wrong in Irish society, where violence against women is endemic. That murder is the tip of an iceberg of misogyny, which is pervasive in society because men, the practitioners of ingrained prejudice against women, are in control of society by and large. Within hours of the murder of Ashling Murphy while she was out jogging, a woman who regularly ran along the canal path said that she also jogged in the local forest and that she was not afraid of anything in the forest except the men she saw while jogging. To men, that comment might seem odd but it is not at all odd when you listen to women's experiences of life in a male-dominated society, some of which have been shared here today, or when you reflect on the statistics in respect of violence against women and the sexism, verbal harassment, intimidation and violence women experience at the hands of men.

Women are not afraid of their surroundings; they are afraid of violent and abusive men. Why would they not be? The following information is frightening. More than 244 women have died violently since 1996. Some 18 children have died alongside their mothers and 152 women have been killed in their own homes. Some 87% of these women were killed by a man known

to them while 13% were killed by a stranger. In almost all murder-suicide cases, 22 out of 23, the killer was the woman's partner. Femicide is the outworking of male attitudes to women across a broad canvas of views and behaviours, including rape, sexual assault, coercive control, intimate partner abuse, groping, commercial exploitation, everyday sexism, sexist trolling and catcalling. Most violence, abuse and coercive control and harassment of women by men goes unreported. In one of five cases of detected sexual violence reported, both the victim and the suspected offender were under 18 when the offence occurred. Women's Aid support workers in this State heard more than 30,000 disclosures of domestic violence, including coercive control. A total of 24,893 disclosures related to abuse against women and 5,948 to child abuse. Between March and December 2020, an average of 180 women and 275 children sought emergency accommodation every month. In the same period, 2,159 requests for refuge could not be met by the services.

The peculiar nature of the pandemic, with isolation and other restrictions, has made circumstances worse for many women. During the first six months of the pandemic, calls to women's refuge services showed that 19 new women and three new children called every day. Following the murder of Ashling Murphy, Women's Aid has called for zero tolerance for male violence against women. Safe Ireland has stated the murder must prompt a national response, while the National Women's Council has called for the issue of violence against women to be housed under one Department.

At the beginning March, the third State strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is due to be published. The Government must implement, resource and fund this strategy in full. Sinn Féin again calls on the Government to set up within the Department of the Taoiseach a domestic, sexual and gender-based violence policy and implementation unit. We need a firm commitment from the Government to implementing the recommendations from the independent study on familicide and domestic homicide reviews, which is due to be released shortly. We need better data on sexual, violent and gender-based crime in this State and the implementation of a State database for such crimes. We need to speed up the completion of the sexual violence survey, which is not due to be completed until 2023. These and many other measures are needed to eradicate the scourge of violence against women.

Much progress has been made on creating a just legal society where women and men can share equal space. This progress was made because women and men collaborated to ensure that it would happen and, as other Senators have acknowledged, more often than not because women had to demand and fight for it. The same approach is needed to create a new society where misogyny, patriarchy and violence against women are a thing of the past.

As men, we have been encouraged to listen and, more important, to act. There would be no greater example of male privilege than if we came to the Chamber, said all the right things and then left and did not act. As my male colleagues have said, we need to call this out, but that is only one part of it. We need also to stop it. We need to stop wrapping ourselves in the comfort male privilege and a misogynistic society afforded to us as men. We need not just to say we are allies but to act as allies of women, and we need to do that in institutions such as this one as legislators. I hope we can legislate, in concert with the Minister, to end gender-based violence. Furthermore, we need to act when we leave this Chamber.

I cannot speak for the female politicians in this institution, but I have seen examples where women politicians have had their appearance or style of dress called into question and where they have been told to calm down. Senator Dooley spoke about a professional, but I have heard

people in this House tell female political leaders to lower their voice or confront them in such a way. All that needs to end and to be called out and challenged. No matter what aspect of our lives it is in, we as men, alongside women, need to be proactive in challenging that.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister for appearing before the House to speak on this important issue. I express my sympathies to the family of the late Ashling Murphy. I met her family and her partner at a candlelit vigil in Mary Immaculate College on Monday evening last, which I attended along with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. It was a very moving tribute and an opportunity to meet her family and friends who were in attendance. The previous time I had seen such an outpouring of grief was when my neighbour Shane Geoghegan was gunned down as a result of a gangland feud. It was a mistaken identity. That happened in 2008 and it was the previous time I had seen an outpouring of grief similar to what we have witnessed over recent weeks.

Violence of any nature, especially against women, is totally unacceptable. I recognise the exceptional and tireless work the Minister has been doing to provide legislation to protect individuals in society. Recently, there have been announcements about the gender-based violence strategy. I also commend Senator Chambers on the Bill she has brought forward. Both items are very important work.

As legislators, we have an important role to show ambition and leadership in developing policy that will combat violence against women and ensure these victims of violence see justice. That is an important message. Generally, as a society, most people want to see equality for women and men, but that applies especially to women. It is only a small minority who make this unachievable. I say a “minority” because it is a small few. Many of our male colleagues have stood up during this debate and been supportive, as have many males throughout the country.

Many of us have witnessed the level of abuse on social media. Recently, I heard a podcast about female councillors and the very high percentage who have experienced abuse online, which many of us experience online as well. People think it is okay to say very insulting things to people. I commend the fact that legislation is being brought forward in that regard. Some young people think sexism is acceptable and that, too, needs to be combated.

Senator Clifford-Lee spoke about the issue of solicitors and support for people who end up in this position. I recently met representatives of Rape Crisis Midwest in Limerick. An issue that came to light related to the fact that many people, when they end up in this situation and the matter ends up going to court, are taken to Dublin. Many women who have been in the position feel that if they could go home at night and sleep in their own bed, they would feel more supported because their family and peers would be there with them and they would have a lot of support. I ask the Minister to examine that. Where possible, the court cases should be held within the nearest jurisdiction to where the person lives. In Limerick, for example, the courthouse in Mulgrave Street has five chambers and they are not all used every day. There are many ways this can be addressed. It is really important women not only feel safe but also have the security of having their family around them. There are three refuges in Limerick and they do fantastic work but it is frightening to think people need to use them. We need to aim towards people feeling safe and feeling as though they have support around them.

I thank the Minister for her attendance and for all the work she is doing.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome the Minister's appearance before the House. We are speaking on such a difficult topic. She is here to say what the Government is going to do to combat domestic and gender-based violence against both women and men. She is getting to hear the voices of both men and women in the Seanad as we express our feelings on the subject. We know about the shocking loss of Ashling Murphy's life and, of course, our thoughts are with her family and friends and the people of Tullamore.

Women's Aid has spoken out about violence against women. More than 230 women have lost their lives in the past two decades. It is culture and behaviours that we have to challenge and stop, as has been mentioned on many occasions. We in the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science have this year produced a report on bullying in schools. Even at school level, one in three pupils has experienced incidents of bullying or cyberbullying. It starts from a young age and we have to tackle that. Bullying cannot be acceptable. It can lead to other types of actual violence, as was seen in the case of Ashling Murphy. We have to call it out and tackle it. It is about the bystanders and upstanders, the people who notice that their friends have become more withdrawn, and whether they are asking questions. Nobody wants to get too involved, but has a friend or a family member become more withdrawn? Are we asking those questions and are we offering them the supports to feel that they can come forward and speak about this? The Minister spoke about upskilling and so forth within the Garda so every member of the Garda is able to be that person for the person who comes through the door.

On 25 November last, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Minister announced funding for 18 organisations across the country. She focused particularly on regional towns, where there can be very simple things such as increasing the number of hours that the telephone lines would be open so they are open late in the evening and at night when people need them, emotional support and more supports for people going to court so when they are taking a legal case they will have legal support. The Minister mentioned additional refuge places in the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. We have discussed this previously and the fact that there are so many counties that do not have these. However, it is not just counties, but towns. It should not be looked at on a county basis. I believe we should look at it on a town basis. What supports are there for urban towns of 5,000 up to 20,000 people? With regard to the refuge places that are available, obviously we are discussing violence against women here but I do not take away from the fact that there is also domestic violence against men and a lot of that, like much domestic violence, is not reported. It is not reported when it happens to men and I am not sure if there are any refuge places available for men, as well as for women. It is a crisis in our society.

I thank the Minister for the work she is doing on the strategy she is bringing forward and for the way in which she has engaged with all communities, particularly in the last few weeks when it has been so difficult. We are aware that there are helplines, including the Women's Aid 24-7 helpline. For people listening to this debate, there is help available. They can talk in confidence. There are ways whereby the numbers cannot be traced or tracked. I encourage people to come forward where it is necessary. I again thank the Minister for her work on this.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I thank the Minister for being present for these statements. I start by expressing my heartfelt sympathy to the family, boyfriend, friends and community of Ashling Murphy. They are living through the nightmare we all fear for our mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters and friends. I also express my deepest sympathy to the family of Urantsetseg Tserendorj, who also died in a random attack 12 months ago. Most of us will have read

the interview with her husband and daughter over the weekend and about the desperately sad circumstances in which they find themselves with regard to their work and housing situation.

As has been said by many and as we know from the work of Women's Aid, 244 women have been killed since 1996 at the hands of a violent perpetrator in this country. A shocking 87% knew their attacker and 62% died in their home. There are thousands more who can count sexual harassment as one of their experiences. We are grateful to Senators Boylan and Hoey for recounting their experiences because it helps others to realise that they are not alone.

This violence requires many responses. I am conscious that much has been said, but the violence requires a response from our education system to tackle the culture of laddishness, male domination, misogyny and sexism. We need many significant changes in our criminal justice system. I am reminded of my former colleague, former Deputy Kathleen Lynch, who used to talk so much about the burden of proof or how there was a burden on the survivors of domestic violence to ensure that the charges were prosecuted. The onus is on a woman, when she has been assaulted, to proceed with the charge. There can be little wonder that the rate of prosecution in domestic violence cases is so low relative to the number of calls that are made to An Garda Síochána.

We need to see changes in terms of how we support victims and survivors. I have spoken previously in the House about the very long waiting lists that so many rape crisis centres across the country are dealing with. It is an issue of resources and it is an issue of pay. It is incredible that we are bringing the pay issue into this, but it relates to retaining counsellors for rape crisis centres across the country. There is the issue of how people are supported through and after the courts process. A number of women have spoken to me about how they felt abandoned after the courts process. There has to be political leadership and I am heartened by the commitments made this week by the Minister in that regard. We look forward to the work of the gender equality committee, which will be chaired by my party colleague, Deputy Bacik.

A less discussed aspect of all this, but one that is nonetheless important, is that there has to be a focus and response from our health system, particularly in mental health services. I understand there is a major undersupply of community forensic psychiatry services, particularly for young men and adolescents under the age of 18 years. We need to understand what is happening with young men and the increase in reported sexual assaults among this group. Perhaps it is the case that it was always happening but that there are more reports now or maybe there are more incidents occurring, but we need to understand. I was struck when two days after Ashling Murphy lost her life there was a newspaper report about an adolescent who was before the court for threatening and harassing a woman, a journalist in fact. The young man's father spoke in court about how he had pleaded for services for his son for many years. He felt that his plea for help had gone unanswered. As the mother of two very small boys, that sent a chill through me. That a family were seeking help and their son went on to offend in that manner is horrendous.

Over the last fortnight we have rightly expressed our outrage at the killing of Ashling Murphy and commemorated her very full life. However, there is an uncomfortable reality in the fact that this has not been extended to every other woman who has lost her life at the violent hands of a man over the past number of years. In the days after Ashling's death I was having a conversation with a person who lives on the Dublin-Wicklow border. The person spoke of the sadness about the killing of Zeinat Bashabsheh. I was shocked because I did not realise that this had happened. She was a mother of five children who had been killed on Christmas Eve. Most of us read the newspapers and watch television, but this had completely passed me by. I was

horrified and ashamed that something like that had passed me by. Obviously, there is an onus on me to read every newspaper that is available, but I checked the archives of the main broadsheets this morning and two of them and the national broadcaster had no reference to her name. Perhaps there was a mention somewhere, but not when I went through their archives this morning. Yes, it was Christmas Eve and there were plenty of distractions, but we have no excuse. Every woman's death has to be properly reported and we need to be shocked. The thing is that we have got used to this happening. If there is one legacy of Ashling's death, it is that we now are taking the harassment and murder of women in violent circumstances much more seriously.

In all this we must think about women of colour, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, trans women and women who were not born here but who live here. They must be an important part of the conversation that has to happen now. We look forward to working with the Minister on the strategy that is to be developed. I conclude by expressing my condolences to all the families who have lost loved ones at the hands of a violent person over the years.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister for coming to the House today for this debate and for all the work that she and her Department are doing. It was her intention anyway to come forward with the new policy. I have a lot of confidence in her to deliver a new strategy. It is a strategy that needs to be holistic. All of the answers do not come from the Department of Justice, but that Department and the Minister have the task of leading on this.

I extend my condolences again to the family, friends and community of Ashling Murphy and all the families, friends and communities that have been impacted by violence, particularly violence against women. With regard to my constituency, Dublin Central, I particularly want to send sympathy and support to the families of Urantsetseg Tserendorj and Amanda Carroll, who were murdered. Amanda Carroll was murdered in Cabra. Jennie Poole was a young woman murdered in Finglas.

Today we have all spoken about violence and the need for us to have a zero-tolerance approach to it. I agree with that, obviously, but we also need to recognise that violence has been very much normalised in our society. If we are to say our ambition is to have zero tolerance, we need to approach the task by recognising that something desperately destructive has become normalised in our society. We are aware of this from everyday encounters and real-life experiences that have been described by others, including every woman in this Chamber. Every woman has been affected by casual violence, insidious violence and undercover violence. It can be emotional, economical, physical or verbal. It is not limited to women. It is really important that we engage men in this conversation. To be fair to most men, they are very engaged in this conversation and with this subject. We need to support them and encourage their participation because they are as much of a solution as any of us.

Many of my colleagues and I have had conversations about this subject. I have a husband, a dad and two young adult sons, so I have had many conversations with men about violence. One man gave of his time to share his views with me. I cannot get over his generosity and strength. He was Jason Poole, Jennie Poole's brother. He met me and Deputy McAuliffe, the Deputy in his area, who knows him well. Mr. Poole shared with us his experiences. I am not going to go into them in full detail. Jennie should not have had to experience what happened and her family and children should not have had to experience what happened. We, as a society, cannot tolerate what they have gone through.

I want to share some of the suggestions that Mr. Poole has made. Maybe at some point,

as the Minister progresses with her work, we might be able to find time for her to talk to Mr. Poole directly. I do not know where he is finding the strength and generosity to share his views. The first thing he said — today's debate helps with this but it must go much further — is that we need to have greater awareness of the warning signs. He was focusing on domestic abuse and violence in particular because that is what killed his sister. He really does want action on a wider awareness campaign on the signs of domestic violence. He suggested there should be more sensitivity training for anyone in a role that involves engaging with victims. He spoke about everybody from gardaí to teachers and healthcare workers, in addition to staff from Tusla, local authorities and housing agencies. He wants greater social awareness of the signs. He commended the Garda for its work but believed there are specific actions that could be taken to improve how the Garda is equipped to respond to circumstances of domestic violence. In particular, he suggested having a dedicated garda in each unit responsible for championing responses to domestic violence and best practice in that regard. He talked about gardaí being trained and empowered to remove offenders from a situation. He said consideration should be given to giving powers to the chief superintendent to apply emergency barring and safety orders. He talked about the barring orders.

Senator Clifford-Lee and others mentioned the court process and free legal aid, all of which issues are part of the Minister's strategy to be addressed. Mr. Poole talked about the journey a victim of domestic abuse has to take and the decision to make a call and raise the flag. It is not just about the wraparound services, which are absolutely needed, but the journey the victim must take to go to the Garda, after which they must go to court. Mr. Poole gave clear and simple examples of actions that could be taken to provide better wraparound supports for victims in such circumstances. The victims are absolutely traumatised and it takes all their strength just to get through the next few moments.

Mr. Poole also spoke about the judges and the courts system. In this regard, he talked about training and awareness. He wants a register of offenders. He really believes the information should be in the public domain. If somebody has been a domestic abuser, their name should be on a register. The information should be available. Obviously, the individual should be supported through rehabilitation but, as a society, we need to have a register and a national programme to raise awareness and say loudly and clearly that zero tolerance is not just a catchphrase but something that we are all committed to in every element of our society, including schools and workplaces. We must ensure that we live in a safe community and country and that Ireland can be a country where every woman, girl, boy, man and transgender person can feel safe to live, work and enjoy life.

Senator Martin Conway: The Minister is very welcome to the House for what is one of the most important debates we have had here in a long time. The murder of Ashling Murphy has brought a focus on this issue. It should not have taken such an event for this to happen. I commend the Minister on her very much hands-on approach to this issue, not just in the past couple of weeks but since she took up her position as Minister for Justice. We are very lucky to have her in that role. I believe she will ensure a difference is made.

It is critical for the men in this House to stand up and speak on this issue. The statistics show that 25% of women have suffered from domestic and sexual abuse. That means that of five female friends — we all have five female friends — at least one, and possibly two, will have suffered in this regard. That is totally unacceptable. What is also totally unacceptable is the culture that has pertained over the years in respect of women's access to healthcare, education, equal pay and justice. It is not acceptable that women have to fight for everything. Graphs and

statistics show that even in the private sector, women are underpaid by comparison with men. That should not be acceptable, allowed or tolerated. We have a job of work to do. If we all put this at the top of our agenda and are prepared to roll up our sleeves, we will make a difference, because we have to make a difference. It is critical.

Society also has to change and that can only happen through education, by removing the stereotyping of women with pink dolls and men having blue. All of that type of narrative needs to go. If we are trying to create a truly equal society, it has to start with young children in primary school having respect ingrained in their curriculum and in their activities every day of the week. It also needs to extend to families, and that is where society plays a role. People are influenced. It is said that something like 70% of your character is established and developed by the age of four or five. That means we need to really work to ensure that the message of equality is in primary schools and crèches and that it then percolates up along the line.

As a country, we should be ashamed of ourselves in terms of how we have treated women, but also how we have treated members of the Travelling community. The absolute discrimination that takes place against members of the Travelling community in this country is horrendous, particularly Traveller women. It is appalling. We have plenty of discrimination against non-nationals who come to work in this country - the new Irish - and we saw it manifested in the presidential election in 2018. What happened in that election was an indictment but it is symptomatic of an attitude, an approach and a view.

As someone with a disability, I talk with some little bit of personal experience of how people with disabilities have been treated in this country, particularly women with disabilities. It is shocking. We look at a situation where 85% of people with disabilities in this country are unemployed and cannot get work. What kind of a society is that? It is simply not good enough.

What has happened in the last month, in my view, has created a conversation that should have happened years ago but it is happening now. We need to see fundamental change, led by the Government but embraced by society and promoted by our education system, community groups and sporting organisations. Every single person in this country has a role to play. Every single man in this country has a role to play. We all have to do better, and we all have to commit to doing better. Let the death of Ashling Murphy be the start of a complete and fundamental rebooting of our society and our attitude in society to women, to minority groups, to members of the Travelling community, to people with disabilities, to people who are gay and bisexual, and so on. Every person in this country is equal. Every person is born equal. They need to go through their lives as equal people. When they retire and pass on, they need to have lived a life of equality, where every man, woman and child in this country is treated with respect and treated as an equal. Until we achieve that, we cannot really be proud of the last 100 years as an independent society.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I was always going to find this difficult today. I am very hurt, upset and annoyed over recent developments, in particular the murders and the treatment of women. I listened to Senator Boylan and I know what happened to Senator Hoey and the lewd acts they had to witness. If I am not mistaken, one of their Fine Gael colleagues has had a similar experience recently. It is shocking and outrageous. In regard to that lewd act, I believe we should look at bringing in a serious sentence for men who would carry out such acts online or in front of any woman. It is utterly disgraceful. We do not address that issue well enough. I am sorry Senator Boylan had to go through that. It is deplorable, it is shameful and it is outrageous

that any male would do that.

I want to bring it down to a very personal level. We have a daughter of 23 who teaches in this country. She teaches first class in primary school. She goes for a run almost every day. I have never spoken about what I would do and what a thousand men would do but if she was gone from home for more than an hour, running the back roads, where she could be running 10 km, I would take my car down to that area, park it and go walking, because of that fear of her or her friends being attacked by a male. I know thousands of men do that. We have a huge hillwalking area beside us which is very popular. Since this most recent tragedy, I say to my female neighbours that when I see them go running or walking at dusk, I am watching out until I see them coming back to the house, but I would never have said that to them until this tragedy happened.

The shortcoming from me and from most men is that when we were doing those sorts of things to stand by women, we did not make a public debate about it. We stayed silent about it. We know that, in our own gender, there are people we cannot trust. It is mainly men.

I have huge faith in what the Minister is doing. I know she had started this new policy prior to recent events and I have no doubt she will carry it out. From a male perspective, I will do everything I can and everything I am asked, and I will help out and make suggestions.

I want to give a few statistics on this issue. As has been quoted on a number of occasions, since 1996, on average nine women per year have been killed in this country and the total figure is 244. In 2020, there were 38 murders and six of those, some 15.8%, were of women - innocent women. While all murders are wrong, whether drug-related or not, it is terrible to think that six innocent women died like that in 2020. I did some research in regard to the world situation. Another figure from 2020 is that 47,000 women were killed by intimate partners or family members in 2020, which averages 137 a day. The point I want to stress is that 80% of those killings were carried out by men or teenage boys, and that is not to take into account other areas of murder, but the figure is 47,000 women, or 137 every day in the world. There is a huge problem in Ireland and across the world.

We have another problem with some of the media coverage. There is something that has sickened me in the last ten years. Prior to Christmas, we have the build-up in regard to the soaps, which I know are hugely popular. What is the big point? It is that there is going to be a mysterious killing or a disappearance of a woman. Some people might say that it should be highlighted in a soap but I do not. That is not the reason it is being highlighted. It is being highlighted to up the ratings on the television shows - that is why it is being done. I will back that up. In the two or three weeks prior to that soap being shown over the Christmas period, many media outlets take on an actor or a writer from those soaps, building this up, hyping it up in the media. That should not be allowed.

I have a letter with me from a young lady I know. Anybody can see the letter because I think we need to show the validity of what we have. As I said, I know this lady. She wrote:

I'm sure Minister McEntee has great intentions [in relation to tackling this issue] and protecting women but I'm curious to know what her male colleagues are doing to ensure an end to this war on women? After all this is not just a female issue.

As stated in my previous email I stand strongly on the stance that it is downright disgraceful that women carrying self defense pepper spray or a tazor can receive the same sen-

tence as someone carrying a gun. This is a 5 year sentence [or up to five years]. Our options are break the law and risk a 5 year sentence but stand a chance of survival if attacked or face an attack with nothing to defend ourselves and at this stage we all know the likely outcome of that. Tell me do you think this fair? Do you think this is safe?

I am not condoning violence, but that lady makes a very strong point.

In conclusion, I extend my deepest sympathies to the Murphy family - father, mother, sister and brother - and Ashling's boyfriend, Ryan Casey, whose life has been absolutely destroyed. His grandparents were giving them a site to build a house. I understand they had a wonderful relationship for up to five years. What happened is just horrendous and terrible. Like most men, I promise that we recognise we have a huge role to play here and we will do it.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: She only went for a run, Ashling Murphy. We have all been talking about it ever since her poor body was found. All of this hype will pass but Ashling's mother, father, sister, brother and other relations will have to live with their grief forever. It is really sad that we have been brought to this. I am the brother of eight sisters, the son of a wonderful mother, the husband of a wonderful and tolerant wife, and the father of a daughter. I have a daughter-in-law and two granddaughters. I cannot believe what I have heard here today. I have never been told by any of my sisters that they have been afraid to walk anywhere. I do not disbelieve what I heard, by the way. Senators should not get me wrong; I am horrified that we have arrived at this place in society where women cannot feel safe walking and where people feel they have to look over their shoulder to see who is coming behind them. I am actually horrified by it. I was walking behind a person on a corridor in this building the other day and I thought I should slow my pace slightly because I was getting too close. That is wrong. It is wrong in every sense of the word.

Many Members have spoken this afternoon. The only thing that came out of all of this for me is that I have to reappraise the way I live my life. Maybe the things that I once thought were funny are not so bloody funny after all. Maybe the people, particularly women, who stood in company with me down through the years and heard sexist jokes were not really laughing. Maybe they just felt they had to laugh. Maybe they felt intimidated by the company they were in at the time. Maybe they thought they had to be part of the gang.

In my time as president of the Teachers Union of Ireland, I was horrified by some of the stories I heard of 13-year-old kids engaged in sexual acts. I recall one of my colleagues saying that in the context of young girls in particular, it was not that they wanted to engage in the acts they were engaged in, it was that they thought they should because that was the norm. A principal spoke to me about wanting to introduce a proper sex education programme in his school. It was to be a proper programme that would explain consent, what is right and what is not. He came up against parents. The parents said he was not going to teach that to their kids. He told them he was quite prepared to try to work with them on it but, at the end of the day, it is something that has to be on the syllabus and has to be done. He met with massive opposition to any discussion whatsoever on sex. This is an issue for all of us in society today. We have to rethink the way we think about these things. Growing up as a young man in County Galway, there was only one sin. We were sent to confession every Friday and there was only one sin and that sin was sex. I do not blame the church or anybody else for that; it is just the way society was at the time.

I do not know how I will change my life. I do not know how I will find the courage to say to my male colleagues who send me a joke or tell me something that it is inappropriate and I re-

ally do not want to hear it any more. I do not know how I will do that. I will look to the women whom I know and love to maybe put a bit of smacht on me and change the way I live my life.

The case of Ashling Murphy is terrible; there is no doubt at all about that. We have heard stories this afternoon and ever since Ashling died about how difficult it is for women to live in this country and that is something we have to change. I do not know how we will change it. I have great faith in the ability of the Minister to bring forward legislation, but legislation is not worth diddly squat if we do not implement it. That starts from the ground up.

I spent several days as a juror in Limerick some years ago. Every day, the judge came in at 10 a.m. or 11 a.m. and told us the case was adjourned for the day and to come back tomorrow. Five or six days into the trial, he told us the case was going ahead but the members of the jury were no longer required and he wanted to thank us. The juror sitting beside me asked what the hell the judge meant by saying we were no longer required, seeing as how we had been there for several days. We were told it was a case of rape and the perpetrator had pleaded guilty so there would be no trial; he would be sentenced and that was it. The juror told me that she was not going home until she saw who the fella was. I told her I would sit with her. The next thing, the defendant was brought into court. He was dressed in a white shirt, red tie, navy blue sports jacket, grey trousers and immaculately polished shoes. He looked like a person who just bought I do not know what. He looked well. He looked as if he was well-to-do. I looked at him and waited. We then found out the story behind the case. At 12 midday on O'Connell Street in Limerick city he grabbed a young woman, pulled her into an alleyway and raped her. He did that at midday. Please tell me how he could even think of such a thing at that time of the day.

There is a big lesson here for us all but I do not know how we will learn it. I could stand up here and say I have been reformed. I have been horrified and I have to look into my own self now and see how I can change who I am to be the sort of man who will not accept from my fellow men some of the misogynistic and sexist jokes that I once found funny. To the women I love, I apologise that I found them funny. To those in my company with other men who felt they had to laugh but really were not laughing, I apologise. There is nothing we can do to change what has happened but we can change what will happen going forward. I thank the Minister for her time. She has been very patient today.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I apologise for missing some of the debate. I was tied up for other reasons. I will go back and listen to what was said. It is clear that quite horrifying personal stories have been told today, as was the case in the Dáil, of life experience in a culture that is quite chilling. I brought my daughter to the vigil because I wanted to stand with a sense of hope that somehow the world in which she will grow up will be transformed and changed in some way. I worked for several years as a counselling psychologist and a psychotherapist. I counselled people coming through domestic violence or after domestic violence, as well as perpetrators of domestic violence, so I felt I had an idea, a handle and an understanding of this issue but something about the sheer presence of people outside Leinster House that afternoon brought about different thoughts in me. I thought about the fact that I knew Nadine Lott. I have a very good friend whose sister-in-law was murdered by her partner. I know of other situations. I started counting them up. Of the ones I did not encounter from a professional standpoint - maybe a person somehow wears the mantle of protection if he or she is there as the counsellor and supporter - I looked and thought, "Hold on a minute, let's start counting here within our life experience and within the sphere of my friends and the people in my life." These violent experiences have touched our lives. It was the first time that I thought it is all around us. It is everywhere. I then started thinking about the things that I dismissed in my life. I found myself

with a design team at one stage when I was chief executive of an organisation. The entire design team was male. We were about to spend €15 million and the lead architect, when he started the first meeting, said, “You’ll be taking minutes, won’t you?” I had a male colleague, whom I later married, who turned around and said, “I don’t think so.”

That is clearly no comparison to what has been shared in this House, but it is an example of that assumption of subservience, of the place of women and the place they should automatically take. As a consequence, you have to be abrasive and aggressive and you have to confront and adopt a life that is about taking these things on one by one. We should not have to do that. We are then accused of being aggressive. I am thinking of some of the things I have got passionate or assertive about where I have been told that I was upset and needed to calm down. It is dismissive, once you assert who you are. If you do assert who you are, then you are a piece of work and a whole heap of words go with that. I have never counted that and have always just taken it on the chin. It is a little like the social media abuse we get as politicians. When I first spoke about it, the Garda in Terenure rang me to ask why I did not report it. I thought it was just something I had to take as part of the course of my life. It never occurred to me to report it because there is something in our psyche that says it is okay for us to be treated that way. We resent it but we brace ourselves for it, or cushion ourselves for or against it.

I find the Women’s Aid advertisement very powerful. When it comes on I always break down in tears and think that I love the phrase “the world’s strongest women” because they are. There is something in that act that moves the locus of shame. Yet women have to carry the break-up of the family, including where the children will live, what they will do and whether they have a refuge to go to. They have to almost carry the responsibility when they are victims and not perpetrators. We have to do a big piece on the perpetrator in our lives being where the shame stands. There is a piece of education that needs to start from birth. Women, when they are presented with the key to their door, as I was, are not taught how to hold it. There are things like that we should never have to do. I fear that the work is so great, it is almost overwhelming.

There is a list of exceptionally fine actions that were being taken long before recent events. There is no doubt that under the Minister’s leadership on this issue extraordinary work has been carried out. We need to change the culture. One of my team rang me up to say that “Help her feel safe” needs to be the theme. It needs to include dedicated evenings in the park that are women only. There needs to be the sense that if a man is walking behind a woman, maybe he should cross the road. I come in and out of the argument in my own head about how we should cope with it. How do we create a safe place for everybody to discuss what that is? How do we make sure that women are not by their very nature demonised?

I will finish shortly; I am conscious of the time. I devilled, which was my year’s training after being called to the Bar, in 2012. I used to get in very early in the morning to be ahead of all the stuff for the day. One morning there was a conversation between two male counsel. The prosecuting counsel, who was an exceptional barrister, was heavily pregnant. The conversation between the two men was that they hoped the jury would not be swayed by her pregnancy in the determination. I spoke up because I cannot not speak up in that scene and gave a very clear retort, which is probably why I am not practising at the Bar at present but am in the Chamber. I am here because I cannot keep quiet and play by the rules. We cannot do that. I then think, my God, next month or next year those counsel could be prosecutors, defenders or cross-examining women in the dock. We need a massive overhaul. I know from the Tom O’Malley report that a significant amount of work and training has been done. People like Ellen O’Malley-Dunlop, during her time at the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and since, have done extraordinary work in

retraining and ensuring there is an awareness of and sensitivity towards women.

I commend our work but we have got to figure out a way to fundamentally change how we approach this issue. It needs to start from birth.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. The context and background for today's debate is clear. Our thoughts and prayers continue to be with the Murphy family in Tullamore. We grieve the outrageous attack on and murder of their beloved Ashling. We double down and commit to doubling down on our determination as politicians and members of Irish society to do everything in our power to tackle and overcome anything that contributes to such violence.

It goes without saying that concern about violence against women, about attitudes towards women in our society and about any issue regarding the socialisation of boys and men that might contribute towards violence against women must always be high on our agenda in the Oireachtas. Violence against women is a problem that must be overcome. I acknowledge the personal testimonies that have been expressed here today. I express my own sympathy and sorrow that any colleagues of mine, or anybody at all, should have to endure such a thing. I had the strange experience of being conned out of money last night and had the very good fortune of actually meeting the con man today. I had a satisfactory encounter, shall we say, but the thought occurred to me as I came to the Chamber this evening how little I have to worry about in that my encounter with crime was not one that involved fear. It was one that involved getting back into the driving seat and being able to overcome the annoyance I felt at being conned.

I called for a debate on violence in our society more generally in recent weeks. I did so because issues are surfacing in our society that go beyond the issue of violence against women, as important and troubling as that is whenever it occurs, which is all too frequently. It touches on questions that, if we confine ourselves to discussing violence against women exclusively, we might fail to detect and discuss. That would be to the detriment of our struggle against violence against women and other forms of violence in our society. I am also conscious that we are putting ourselves at a remove, in a sense, from what occurred in Tullamore when we talk about causes and effects. A process is now under way and nothing we want to say should cast any light or shadow of any kind on what must take place there.

I am not praising or criticising anything that has been said by others. I just want to make a few general points. I will not have time to make them all and I apologise if some of what I am saying will sound very theoretical. I sat down to get my thoughts together on this and to write them out. Whenever a major event occurs that causes significant emotional upheaval, it is natural for people to want to comment and for people with particular points of view to seek to draw a link between what has occurred and the point of view they want to advance. There is often a grain of truth, or even substantial truth, in their perspective, but we must always remember that the problem with focusing on grains of truth, or on only some of the grains of truth, is that we might end up with a distorted perspective on reality.

For example, if there is evidence of racist attitudes in the workplace, or even among children in a schoolroom, how causative is that of an act of violence in a given situation, where the perpetrator and the victim of crime are of different racial backgrounds? We know that we cannot eliminate some differences and it would be wrong to try. We also know that we should try to promote respect for people who are different from us. However, if a crime occurs where such a difference between people exists, let us say in the hypothetical situation of racial difference,

does that indicate that we have not succeeded in tackling, or even tried hard enough to tackle or succeeded enough in promoting, the issue of the respect we all believe in? While we want to make linkages, we always need to be careful. The causes are not always clear-cut. I would contend, for example, that it was wrong to say that single-sex schools are a causative factor of violence against women or even that they are at some level of a pyramid at the apex of which are acts of violence towards women. That does not help. That is why, even while we engage with the personal difficulties of all of this and the horror of it, we need also to look at what precisely is being said, what fits the jigsaw and what does not.

When we focus on the subset of a problem, let us not endanger solidarity in society. Say, for example, there is a heavy focus on bullying around sexual identity or other issues. Does that subtract from the focus we need to have on bullying based on disability, physical characteristics, religious difference or whatever? It goes without saying that where there is systemic bullying of a particular kind, there may be a need to address that pretext but often a pretext is only a pretext and the real problems have to do with bullies' attitudes to themselves, to other people and to violence as a means of masking insecurity - all sorts of things that apply regardless.

There is a broader set of questions that we need to think about. Does the prevalence of pornography and violence in the media and online cause depravity? Are there issues about mental health and those suffering from mental health? We rightly promote the approach of community-based care, but are there people who should be in institutions? I say that as a person who lost a dear friend who was murdered by a person who should not have been at large in society. Are there issues about our integration of minorities in society? I say that as somebody who is, and always has been and will continue to be, strongly supportive of generous immigration policies. Is there a problem of excessive drinking, the importation and widespread consumption of illegal drugs and attitudes towards this? Is that leading to violence? Is there a loss of the sense of meaning and purpose in life connected with a decline of religious faith contributing to a growing individualism, to the decline of a sense of moral obligation to be gentle, respectful and inclusive towards others and to a culture of recklessness and a venting of resentment, all of which involve a disregard for law and morality? Does the loss of a sense of distinct abilities and roles of men and women in our society and a loss of respect for the sanctity of life in some of our laws contribute to the problem?

The personal testimonies of injury and violence suffered heard here again today, as I have said, deserve our sympathy and support and - I say in the same breath - it is vital that we include all members of the community in the discussion about how we get to a better place. I will not fault those who hashtag "not all men". They are entitled to express that truth into the discussion. They are not trying to cover up for evildoers. It is vital that we ask not only some of the questions but all of the questions about why violence towards women and other forms of violence happen in society and it is vital that we do not end up cocooned here in Parliament somehow separated from the broader discussion that is going on in society about why some of these things are happening.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Pauline O'Reilly): As I am chairing this portion of the debate, I take this opportunity to thank everyone. Obviously, I do not agree with the comments of everyone - having debate is what the Chamber is about - but it has been a welcome debate. Some have mentioned that they are shocked by some of the things that some of the women have said. Personally, I am shocked that people are shocked by some of what has been said because they strike a chord with many of us. That there is that level of shock that we walk around in the world afraid and always having to look out for ourselves and that others are not aware of that is

striking. I thank those women who have shared their experiences. I also think of those women who have not. The world is made up of many women who are living with experiences and that is important to mention as well. I call on the Minister to conclude the debate.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank all the Senators for their contributions. I thank those who have given of their own personal lived experience because it is not easy to do, certainly not standing in Parliament. Indeed, I thank those who have spoken on behalf of victims and survivors.

I thank everyone for their proposals and suggestions. I genuinely mean this. There is no right or wrong answer. I want to work with everyone. Where there are suggestions and proposals, I have obviously taken note today but if there is anything further that Senators wish to give to me, I would very much like to and will engage with the Senators on it.

I stated at the outset that there is no one person or one group, no one policy or one law, that will address this issue. It is about collectively, each and every one of us, working together in this House and in the Dáil. It is Government, all Departments, State agencies, the community and voluntary sector, and front-line workers, and each and every one of us. It is, at the crux of all of that, listening to victims, listening to survivors and listening to that lived experience.

We need to make this moment count. I say that in no way ignoring, removing or diminishing the 244 women who have been killed since 1996, and those before them. It is in no way to diminish the lived experience of the many victims and survivors whom we have heard from or, indeed, the many women who are at home or will go home today and are in fear for themselves and for their children, but we need to make this moment count. I will do everything I can to make sure that I play my part and I would ask that each and every one of us does what we can to play our part and to make this moment count.

I thank everyone for their contributions. I look forward to working with Senators. I will not repeat all of the work that we are doing. Obviously, this involves not only the Department of Justice but each and every Department and each and every one of us in society trying to tackle this issue.

To comment on zero tolerance, I appreciate it might seem aspirational but to me there is no other alternative as a goal or objective. We cannot have anything less than zero tolerance, either in the criminal justice system or in society. While it might seem like an aspirational goal, as far as I am concerned there is nothing more or less that we can aspire to than zero tolerance of any kind of violence, abuse or discrimination against women.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Mary Seery Kearney): When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Eugene Murphy: Next Tuesday at 2.30 p.m.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ag 5.38 p.m. go dtí 2.30 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 1 Feabhra 2022.

The Seanad adjourned at 5.38 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 1 February 2022.