



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 3 Feabhra 2021

Wednesday, 3 February 2021

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10 a.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

Household Utility Bills Support: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— 475,364 people received the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) last week, an increase of 15,443 on the previous week;

— the society of St. Vincent de Paul estimates that energy poverty affects one in six households in Ireland, and is concerned that a significant proportion of households will be in energy debt as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic;

— a person who loses their job cannot access the Fuel Allowance until they are in receipt of a Jobseeker's payment for more than 390 days (over 15 months);

— the Fuel Allowance is not available to recipients of the PUP;

— the PUP rates have not been adjusted to take into account increased heating costs during winter months and households currently have to make their weekly payments stretch even further to meet these costs; and

— many households on reduced income as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic are ineligible for the Fuel Allowance due to the limited qualifying criteria, which does not consider the financial impact of the pandemic and the urgent support these households need during difficult winter months; and

calls on the Government to:

— suspend the requirement that a person who loses their job must be in receipt of a Jobseeker's payment for over 15 months before they can qualify for the Fuel

Allowance, for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic, and review the qualifying period thereafter;

— extend the Fuel Allowance of €28 per week to PUP recipients;

— establish a discretionary fund for Covid-19 utility debt, of an initial five million euro, to provide assistance to individuals and households struggling with Covid-19 related heating and electricity costs;

— ensure that the budget for the Exceptional Needs Payment is sufficient, as well as ensuring access to and flexibility from Community Welfare Officers; and

— make a double payment of the Fuel Allowance to all existing recipients for two weeks in February.

Almost 480,000 people received the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, yesterday. They have lost their jobs through no fault of their own. For every one of those workers, their outgoings and bills remain the same - indeed, some bills have increased because they are spending more time at home - but, in many cases, their income has been reduced. The only new message from the Government for those people on the PUP who have lost their jobs is that they will be receiving a tax bill. That is all they have heard from the Government. In some cases, that tax bill will be up to €1,400.

Last autumn, I carried out a survey relating to household debt. More than 300 respondents shared their stories with me. This is what some of them told me:

Lost all my work and struggled to pay the household bills. Had to borrow money to pay some bills.

Unable to manage the higher bills like electric and ... fuel costs now coming into the Winter. I'm on lower income with PUP ... Now looking at services that can be cut.

Shopping on a weekly basis is gone. We don't have it as bills come first ...

... I'm trying to keep things together for the sake of my family. I cry most nights going to bed, so my son and husband do not see how much of a toll it is taking on me. [Both of us are] out of work ...

The price of utility bills keeps rising. I had to take unpaid ... leave [from work] as crèches could not take my baby, so we are struggling now with just one income.

Other comments were as follows:

Shopping on a weekly basis is gone. We don't have it as bills come first ...

... I'm trying to keep things together for the sake of my family. I cry most nights going to bed, so my son and husband do not see how much of a toll it is taking on me. [Both of us are] out of work ...

The price of utility bills keeps rising. I had to take unpaid ... leave [from work] as crèches could not take my baby, so we are struggling now with just one income.

This is the real life reality for people on the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, today.

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The Minister's response, in her amendment to this motion, refers to the PUP, the fuel allowance and the household benefits. These are the very payments that the people on the PUP are not getting, hence the entire purpose of this motion.

The Minister also refers to the North in the amendment. It reminds me of when I was in primary school, probably junior or senior infants, and arguing with a girl in my class about which of our fathers had more cattle and going through how many animals each of us had. I spoke last night to a friend who lives with her partner in the North of Ireland. They pay approximately £5 a week on electricity and they would not be skimping on it. Her car tax costs £20 a year. Fuel costs in the North of Ireland cannot be compared with those down here because there is no comparison. The cost of living down here is extortionate for families and those who have lost their jobs. It turns my stomach to see comparisons made to the North of Ireland where, last week, the Sinn Féin Minister for Communities introduced Covid-19-related heating payments, one-off payments of £200 to people struggling in fuel poverty in the North of Ireland. That is what we are doing. The Government down here is offering nothing new in its amendment to this motion.

We are asking for action from the Government, meaning a double payment for two weeks in February, as has been done before when we have had extremely cold weather. It is not impossible; it has been done. It will cost €20 million which will not break the bank. We are looking for a proper budget for the exceptional needs payment which the Minister constantly says is an option for people. We know, of course, that it is an awful lot harder to get to a community welfare officer. We also know that not everyone is comfortable going down that route. There is always discretion when it comes to the community welfare officer, so there is no guarantee of payment. I have asked the Minister several times about the 15-month rule. If I lose my job tomorrow, I get no fuel assistance for 15 months. The Minister has said twice that she has looked at that and I have got nothing back. I am asking for that rule to be suspended temporarily for people who are losing their jobs and, in some cases, losing everything they have ever had in relation to work.

I have asked the Minister to extend the fuel allowance to recipients of the PUP. There are a few weeks of the fuel allowance left, although it might be extended. It is a measure the Minister can implement tomorrow to help these workers and their families. I am asking her to introduce a discretionary fund of €5 million. This is not an ask from me or Sinn Féin, it is an ask from the National One Parent Family Alliance.

The Minister and her Government think they are doing enough. SPARK, One Family, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Focus Ireland and a total of ten organisations that are on the ground and helping people day in, day out beg to differ. They are saying what is there is not enough. That is the message I am getting across to the Minister today. It is not enough. Government is about choices and this Government chooses to increase the pay of super junior Ministers. It chooses to give the head of the Department of Health an increase. It should be choosing to help these families who are struggling in the midst of a global pandemic. The message in this amendment is nothing new. It is a tax bill and nothing more.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I commend my colleague, Deputy Kerrane, on bringing this motion to the floor of the Dáil. It is a reasonable motion with practical solutions that would dramatically improve the lives of many. Fuel poverty means that people literally do not have the ability to afford to heat their homes for them and their families. Families choose between putting food on the table, heating their homes and paying bills. We have the fuel allowance but there is clear evidence that in its current form, it simply does not go far enough because despite

this allowance, the reality is that many still cannot afford to meet their heating needs and in their absolute desperation, have to turn to charities, such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, that will pay for deliveries of oil or coal, or pay their electricity bills. This should not be happening. The State should ensure its citizens do not experience cold due to affordability. Heating is a basic need and it is life critical. I spoke to one carer in Galway city who assists many elderly people across the city. The very difficult and upsetting reality is that a lot of elderly people to whom she calls stay in one room in the house, usually the kitchen, for the entirety of the day until they go to bed because they simply cannot afford to heat the rest of the house. I am sure we can all think of elderly friends, neighbours and relatives who do this. Even more shockingly, she told me that some elderly people stay in bed until the afternoon when the afternoon carer comes because they do not have the ability to keep the fire going all day. Some of them even decline to have a shower because the house is so cold. How horrendous is that? This has a knock-on effect because when people stay in bed it reduces their mobility and increases the chance of them getting sores.

It is not just the elderly that this is affecting. Another woman told me that she can pay for only one bag of coal a week, which means that she can only light the fire in the afternoon. As a result, at a time when we are asking people to stay at home, she wakes up in a cold house and she must wait in the cold until she can heat the house simply because she is on a low income. Another woman told me that this winter, for the very first time, she had to go to a moneylender to pay to heat her home.

We can do something about this by accepting the motion. It makes sense to extend the fuel allowance to PUP recipients. It also makes sense to suspend the requirement of being in receipt of jobseeker's payments for 15 months. In addition, it makes sense to make a double payment of the fuel allowance to all existing recipients for two weeks in February. Let us all come together and support Deputy Kerrane's motion and improve the lives of people in communities.

Deputy Réada Cronin: It says a lot about where we are when in one breath we are discussing an €80,000 salary top-up for a public service worker, and in the next we are talking about other workers in places such as north Kildare who cannot afford to light their home, cook a meal or turn on the heating. We have swapped the metaphorical cold house of the mother and baby homes for the literal cold house where working families and the elderly wear their coats indoors, or go to bed early, simply to keep warm.

Behind closed doors people are struggling with their emotional and mental health because of the extended lockdowns. We are in our fourth lockdown in County Kildare. We are hunkering down for the long haul, but too many of us are doing it in the cold. Let us imagine what it is like to watch one's children miserable, not able to get comfortable, because they are just too cold. Let us imagine being an older citizen isolating at home, who is unable to sit on the bus or train to keep warm in order to save a couple of hours worth of heating. Can we imagine how disempowering that is for parents and pensioners? This is not a tenement society of the previous century, this is a so-called successful society where luxury city pads lie empty while tent cities are full and working families in my constituency of Kildare North are grateful for the dark because nobody sees the Society of St. Vincent de Paul man coming. We have a so-called successful society where there is money to burn on State overruns, while people with asthma, COPD and bronchitis suffer exacerbation because of the cold of their home and still more suffer cold-induced stress, anxiety and depression.

Our plan would bring them in from the cold, literally, and in every way that matters. I com-

mend my comrade, Deputy Kerrane, on her Private Members' motion. We believe in a shared human dignity. We believe we live in each other's shelter, not in each other's shadow. Let us just think of the 475,000 people who got the PUP last week, so many of them in my constituency. I know from them how impossible it is to heat and eat on that money in the middle of winter, in the middle of a pandemic. We propose that anyone on the PUP would also get the fuel allowance and a double payment of the allowance for a fortnight in February. Crucially, we call on the Minister to set up an initial discretionary Covid fund of €5 million to help the thousands of households with utility debts and arrears. These debts are not just a social poison; they are a human degradation that social justice activists have long warned about. The Government's handling of Covid-19 is laying bare all the fault lines in society. It is stripping away the veneer of our compassion. We are quarantining people in the cold and we must do better. With this motion, we can.

Deputy David Cullinane: This motion seeks fair play. Time and again the Government says that the Opposition does not come forward with solutions. We do come forward with solutions, but the problem is that the Government does not like them. The Government does not listen and it does not act. The Minister's party has no regard for what I would consider to be fair play; if it did, it would support this motion. There are two central requests in this motion which should be accepted and implemented by the Government. One is that the fuel allowance payment is doubled for the month of February and the other is that all of those in receipt of the PUP, the 480,000 workers who have lost their jobs, temporarily or in the longer term through no fault of their own, are given access to the fuel allowance payment. The Minister's answers to those requests is "No".

I have said to the Minister and her colleagues time and again in this Chamber that Fine Gael represents a cosseted, privileged class. The Minister does not like it when I say that but the reality is that it is true. The Minister does not like it because it is true and she does not have any defence to that argument. Three of the Minister's senior ministerial colleagues in the Government sat down a number of weeks ago and hatched a plan between them to increase the pay of one senior civil servant by €81,000, an amount that many people on the front line in hospitals will never see as a salary. This is not a salary for that one individual but a pay increase of €81,000. Three senior Government Ministers sat down, hatched that plan and as late as yesterday, were defending it with the L'Oréal-type defence that the individual is worth it. Yet, when it comes to giving ordinary workers and families a bit of a break by giving them access to the fuel allowance because they are staying at home longer, their children are not at school and they have to heat their homes but are struggling to pay their bills, what does the Minister say? She says "No". Again, it is "No" from this Government because it represents a cosseted, privileged class. Its priority is those in the upper echelons of society and not those who need support the most. It is a disgrace that on an issue as important as this, when we are trying to ensure people and families are given adequate support to pay for basics like heating their homes, the Government's response is "No". It is shameful.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: As of last week over 12,000 people in my constituency of Longford-Westmeath were in receipt of the PUP. The vast majority of those 12,000 workers and families have never needed social welfare support previously and need it now solely because of this pandemic. The struggle to keep a warm roof over their heads is very real and so is their growing energy debt as they try to meet the cost of keeping their homes warm.

I want to highlight the case of one family for the Minister. Dad is a tradesman and Mam works in the home, caring for their small children. They are an average, hard-working family

who always managed to keep their heads above water until this pandemic struck and Dad was laid off. For the first time ever, they could not even pay their rent. This family and countless others have survived this winter by begging and borrowing from friends, family and charities. Initially their local community welfare officer refused their application for an exceptional needs payment but eventually they were given a one-off payment to provide heat for a single week. They found themselves in the unprecedented and deeply distressing position of having to choose between spending their last €10 on food or on electricity. That week, food won and they sat in their kitchen in front of the oven for heat while the food cooked. This is not an isolated case. It is a reflection of the wider, very real lived experiences of people who are in need of urgent support.

I call on the Minister not only to heed the concerns being expressed here today, concerns that are echoed by Barnardos, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Free Legal Aid Centres, FLAC, but also to act on them. I urge her to extend the fuel allowance to workers in receipt of the PUP, suspend the 15-month qualifying exclusion period for jobseekers and provide a double-week payment for two weeks in February. A properly funded scheme for exceptional needs payments will assist not only those on the PUP but others who are fighting fuel poverty on an ongoing basis this year. This payment is called an exceptional needs payment. We are living in exceptional times and these measures are needed now.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Families have been hit very hard by this latest lockdown. It has been a very difficult year for families across the midlands and throughout the country. Many have lost their jobs and face significant drops in income through no fault of their own. In the case of Laois, Offaly and Kildare, this is actually the fourth lockdown. There are currently 475,000 people on the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, 6,838 of whom are in Laois while 6,707 are in Offaly. The reality behind these figures is that families are struggling to pay bills, to put food on the table and to pay for daily essentials.

The Sinn Féin motion is aimed at providing some relief to these families. Our motion will amend the fuel allowance scheme to provide financial support for heating costs to all families on the pandemic unemployment payment. We are also calling for the double week payment of fuel allowance for two weeks to be paid to existing claimants and recipients of the PUP in February. This is really needed for the reasons that have been outlined this morning. It would mean that people who lost their jobs over the course of the pandemic and who are on the PUP would not be excluded from the fuel allowance scheme.

Households in the midlands must also contend with the cessation of peat harvesting. Many families would have bought turf plots. This is an issue right across Laois and Offaly but the Government has not addressed it. Many families who bought turf plots from Bord na Móna in previous years and who saved turf themselves now have no alternative source of fuel. They do not have any other means and now do not even have that. They must now buy much more costly solid fuel for heating and cooking and this is causing real problems. They also face an increase in the carbon tax for the second year running. This was pushed through by the Minister's Government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party.

What we are asking for is very modest. It is interesting that, just a few weeks ago while the Christmas holidays were ongoing and just after, a pay rise of €81,000 on top of a salary of €211,000 was sanctioned for whoever is hired as the new Secretary General in the Department of Health. We need to try to address some of this imbalance. These families need an alternative source of fuel. Families throughout the State need some financial support.

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The Minister must also confirm the situation regarding the moratorium on gas and electricity disconnections. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, announced in early January that a new moratorium until 31 January was to be introduced. The Minister must now ensure that moratorium remains in place and will not be discontinued until we are on the far side of the pandemic. Will the Minister revert to me in that regard? It is really important that people have food, heat and shelter. Many people this morning do not have a home. Many do not have heating for their home or enough to eat. People are trying to sustain a difficult juggling act but debts are coming due because some of the banks are not listening with regard to the so-called mortgage break. We are asking the Minister for financial relief to make sure that people can keep warm until we are on the far side of this pandemic.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after “Dáil Éireann” and substitute the following:

“notes that:

— the Government is firmly committed to targeting supports to those who need them most and is also committed to combatting fuel poverty by a variety of measures and in supporting those on low incomes with their home heating costs through the Fuel Allowance scheme and other supports;

— the Government is constantly monitoring the supports it provides during this Covid-19 pandemic;

— the budget for the Supplementary Allowance Scheme is not capped and is operated in a discretionary and flexible manner by Community Welfare Officers in the Department of Social Protection;

— the use of targeted schemes such as the Supplementary Welfare Allowance ensures that resources are targeted where they are needed most;

— the Government is providing unprecedented support through the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme to those who have lost employment during the period of the pandemic;

— since last March over 14 million PUPs have been issued, with over 820,000 people receiving support under the scheme and the total cost of PUP to date is about €5.5 billion;

— approximately 443,000 people have benefited from the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme at a total cost of over €4.5 billion; and

— the rates of PUP are more than double the support available to impacted workers in Northern Ireland where payments are about £100 weekly; and

further notes that:

— over 372,000 households will be supported in the 2020/2021 fuel season starting October 2020 and concluding in the week of 9th April, 2021, at a cost of over €300 million;

— an estimated 465,000 households receive electricity or gas allowances through the Household Benefits Package throughout the full year at a cost of €265 million annually;

— the Fuel Allowance was increased by €3.50, from €24.50 per week to €28 per week, with effect from 4th January, 2021, the highest weekly rate ever, and other targeted increases to Qualified Child payments and the Living Alone Allowance also took effect in January;

— the total value of the fuel allowance in Ireland across a full free fuel season is €784 per household, which far exceeds the value of equivalent payments in neighbouring jurisdictions such as Northern Ireland where, for example, the Winter Fuel Payment ranges in value from £100 to £300;

— the fuel allowance season was extended in 2020 by four weeks at a cost of almost €37 million, and the Government will, as it does every year, consider if the 2021 fuel allowance season should be extended beyond 9th April depending on the economic circumstances and prevailing weather conditions;

— in addition to the Fuel Allowance, the Government provides targeted supports to people experiencing exceptional costs or financial difficulties through the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, and payments can be, and are made, under this scheme in respect of exceptional heating costs;

— the Government is committed to supporting the retrofitting of the housing stock, which is the ultimate solution to fuel poverty;

— this year will see the largest budget for retrofitting in the history of the State, including over €100 million in capital funding to support lower income households to retrofit their homes through the Warmer Homes Scheme, representing a €47 million increase on the 2020 allocation; and

— in addition, funding of €65 million is being made available in 2021 through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, to support the retrofitting of up to 2,400 social housing homes.”

I welcome the opportunity to have this discussion in the House on this very important matter. We are all concerned with protecting our people from the severe financial and economic consequences of the pandemic. I accept that this has been a very difficult time. Since Covid-19 first arrived on our shores last March, the Government has, at all times, sought to support workers and families. My Department mobilised quickly to introduce the pandemic unemployment payment and, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of staff throughout the country, we were able to get payments to more than 600,000 people in a matter of days at the onset of the pandemic last spring. The hard work of the staff in the Department of Social Protection continues. It is worth remembering that, when the PUP was introduced, it was originally intended to remain in place for a period of just six weeks.

As we know now, it has been in place for over a year and beyond. Over 14 million payments have issued to over 820,000 people under the PUP to date, at a total cost of over €5.5 billion. A further 443,000 people have been supported under the wage subsidy schemes at a cost of €4.5 billion. That is a total of €10 billion. These supports are unprecedented in scale from any

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Government in the history of the State but they were and remain the right thing to do to protect workers and families throughout the country. It is worth noting that independent research from the ESRI has shown that these supports have been particularly effective at protecting those on lower incomes.

I want to make it very clear today that the Government is absolutely committed to supporting those on low incomes with their home heating costs through the fuel allowance scheme and other supports. Over 372,000 households will be supported in the current fuel season which started at the end of last September. We will conclude in mid-April at a cost of over €300 million. In addition, 465,000 households receive an electricity or gas allowance of €420 per year through the household benefits package at a cost of €265 million annually. I want to build further on these supports and that is why in budget 2021 the fuel allowance was increased by €3.50 to €28, the highest ever weekly rate for fuel allowance. That measure took effect in January which means that the total value across a fuel season is now €784. By comparison, the winter fuel payment in Northern Ireland is between €100 and €300.

The Government will, of course, continue to keep all of our supports under review as we have done at all times throughout the pandemic. For example, the fuel allowance season last year was extended by four weeks at a cost of almost €37 million. I will continue to keep the need for a similar extension under review this year, taking account of the circumstances we are in and the prevailing weather conditions closer to the time.

I am aware that a point was raised here about women who have had to give up work to carry out childminding responsibilities. Women who have to do that and are unable to reach an arrangement with their employer can apply for the pandemic unemployment payment.

The main issue with the Sinn Féin proposal, while accepting the spirit in which it has been brought forward, is that it is not a targeted use of resources. For example, the fuel allowance has always been paid per household and not per individual, as suggested in this motion. If we were to accept the motion, there could be multiple fuel allowance payments going into the same house regardless of whether they are needed. The total cost of the proposal would be €227 million. Whether we like it or not, this would obviously have a knock-on impact on the ability of the Government to fund other critical programmes. Not one Sinn Féin Deputy has expressed any consideration of this.

For anyone who is expecting or experiencing genuine difficulty in heating their home, support is available through the supplementary welfare allowance scheme. My Department already provides targeted supports to people experiencing problems in heating their homes through this scheme, with over 2,000 payments made in 2020.

While I am aware that Sinn Féin mentions a €5 million fund, it is important to point out that the budget for the supplementary welfare scheme is not capped but is demand-led and is operated on a discretionary and flexible manner by community welfare officers. My Department actively promotes the availability of supplementary welfare allowance via its websites and social media channels, its network of Intreo offices, the citizens information services and MABS. That people know about the supplementary welfare allowance, and take it up as needed, is shown by the fact that we spend approximately €120 million on it each year. The scheme serves the purpose for which it was originally established by Frank Cluskey, which is to support people who are experiencing genuine hardship. In this way, it is targeted and provides support to those who most need it. I believe the shared objective we have here today is to help people

who do not have the wherewithal to cover extra fuel costs and to target resources at those who need them most. If individuals are experiencing genuine difficulties in heating their homes, I encourage Deputies to please direct them to my Department because we are here to help. I assure Deputies that my priority, and the fundamental objective of the Government, is to ensure that those most in need in our society are supported.

Any fair-minded analysis would find that the Government has not been found wanting in providing support to date. We only have to look at the Exchequer figures released yesterday to see that they show total spending by my Department is up 42%. I accept, however, that there will always be hard cases. I hear about them in my constituency office, and I do not doubt the sincerity of Deputies raising those cases today. My core message is that if people need additional support above and beyond what is already in place, I ask the Deputies to tell those people to contact my Department. Support is available through the supplementary welfare allowance scheme. I am sharing the rest of my time with Deputy Bruton.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I welcome this debate, but listening to the Sinn Féin speakers, one would not get any hint that energy poverty has halved in the past three years, that is, between 2016 and 2019. The key to tackling energy poverty lies in the energy systems that families have. A less energy efficient-rated home will have heating bills ten times those of a more energy efficient home. Using an open fire to heat a home is four times more costly compared with an efficient gas system.

I welcome the progress being made under the warmer homes and local authority schemes, where 215,000 homes of low-income families have had their energy rating upgraded. That has probably yielded about a 50% increase in what is available from the fuel scheme. It is a valuable increase, and it is not just for one year. It is an increase in energy efficiency that will continue forever for that home and for the families who live there. The scheme is 100% funded by the Government.

I also welcome the broadened access to the scheme. It is now available to those on carer's allowance, domiciliary care allowance, those jobseekers who have been out of work for more than six months, and those low-income families claiming what used to be called the family income supplement. I also welcome the extension of the community scheme, which is very innovative. It offers more flexibility, because instead of some families just above the threshold having to pay 75% of the cost, this scheme allows lower income families to be included in a flexible way at an affordable cost.

I believe, however, that we must show far greater ambition in this area. I want to see the rental sector, where many low-income families are living, targeted by these schemes. I also want to see an area-based scheme introduced. The reality is that homes built before 1950 typically have six times the energy use of the type of target which we have set for the long term. We must see those homes addressed on an area basis to ensure that every low-income family and others can participate in this upgrading scheme. A retrofitting wave, as it is described in the European Union, which would be modelled on our community scheme, is the answer. and in that way we can make even more progress regarding the important issue of energy poverty.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I listened to what the Minister and Deputy Bruton said, but unfortunately neither addressed the current issue of the impact of the pandemic. Under the current regulations, people must be unemployed for more than 15 months before they are entitled to financial support with their heating costs. This means that workers who lost their jobs during

the pandemic and who are on the PUP are excluded from these vital financial supports.

The National One Parent Family Alliance has highlighted pressing concerns about the ability of families to keep their homes as well as the issue of utility debt and arrears. The Government must change its policy. Thousands of workers in my constituency in Dublin West and beyond are out of work simply because of the pandemic. They are looking forward to going back to work. If there was ever a time to take people out of fuel poverty and to stop people entering fuel poverty it is now. It is simple. We need to: suspend the requirement that a person who loses his or her job must be in receipt of a jobseeker's payment; extend the fuel allowance of €28 per week to people in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP; establish a discretionary fund for a Covid-19 utility debt; and make a double payment for the fuel allowance to all existing recipients for two weeks in February, because we recognise the difficulty they are in. Let us do that for the people who are workers and who are struggling also.

The financial situation for many families and individuals in the pandemic has been extremely difficult. One family who contacted me are on a PUP and they have the heating on all day since Covid. They live in rented accommodation that desperately needs to be upgraded. The windows and doors are in poor condition, which I have seen. There is poor insulation and an old and unreliable heating system. The family has no control over that. Their bills have shot through the roof because they are now in their house all day having being told by the Government that we all need to stay at home.

Another citizen told me that she has worked all of her life. She has a 30-year-old home that is badly insulated. It is a corner house with three of its walls exposed to the elements. She told me she had worked since she was 16 years old, had never asked for a single penny from the Government, had never thought she would have to say she was struggling to pay her bills and she was dreading the heating bill coming in March.

I ask the House to support the motion and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to please not leave a single citizen behind.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I spoke with a woman last week who told me she dreads the really cold weather because she must sleep on a mattress on the floor in her sitting room with her children on mattresses also or on the sofa because she cannot afford to heat the house. She lights the fire in the sitting room and spends the really cold nights there. Another mother told me that her children are constantly getting colds and chest infections, and therefore missing time from school, because the house is so cold. People are being forced to choose between essential items as they cannot afford to pay for everything. They are wearing additional layers of clothing during the day and night and going to bed earlier than they need to just to stay warm. All of this has a detrimental effect on their physical and mental health.

The Covid-19 restrictions have a very negative impact on many households for numerous reasons, but they have had a disproportionate impact on certain families such as those of people with disabilities, older people, people with underlying health issues, and families with children. Since March of last year people have been told to stay at home as much as possible and those in the vulnerable categories have been advised to cocoon. This means they are spending more time at home and having to heat their homes on a constant basis. This may not have been a huge issue last spring and in the early summer when the weather was good, but it is certainly an issue since the autumn and winter when the colder weather came in. This is an ongoing issue for people with disabilities. Poverty is something that many experience since there is an additional

cost of living for a person with a disability. Indeed, there is also a link between unemployment and poverty as people with disabilities are twice as likely to be unemployed compared to the rest of the population and they are more likely to suffer poverty.

Families having to spend a longer time in their homes when they are normally in school, at work or at a day service means that the cost for heating has spiralled. This is heating that might normally have only been put on for a few hours in the evening but now needs to be on constantly throughout the day. This, however, is not happening because people cannot afford to do so. I echo the call of my party colleagues here: to double the fuel allowance for two weeks in February; to introduce the fuel allowance to those on the pandemic unemployment payment; to establish a discretionary fund of €5 million, as is done in other jurisdictions to meet the additional costs due to Covid restrictions; to make it easier to access the community welfare officers; and to ensure the exceptional needs payment is sufficiently financed.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I hope the Government answer to this motion is not just “Suck it up, we are doing enough”. Many have stated already that at this point in time there are 475,364 people on the PUP. In my constituency of Louth this is 15,141, which is a huge number of people who are in a situation they had not anticipated. Many of these people had never been in this situation before. We have all heard the stories about fuel poverty over the years and it needs to be addressed. We need to act on this now. We are in the middle of a serious pandemic. In the last week, Dr. David Nabarro of the World Health Organization, WHO, said that the states that do better are those that give supports to the people. This is a very small request and a small mitigation that can facilitate people on the PUP to gain the fuel allowance. Heat is an absolute necessity. We have asked people to work from home if they can and we have given people who cannot work the support of the pandemic unemployment payment. It is fair to ensure that they are able to stay in a properly heated home.

I wish to address what the Minister said. Sinn Féin has no difficulty. It believes the Department of Social Protection can work out household payments. I do not believe the Department will have a particular difficulty if the Minister wishes to change this. We must ensure that the 15-month exclusion for the PUP is removed, that there is a double payment in February and that households that are in fuel poverty can avail of the fuel allowance payment. If the Minister and the Department of Social Protection wish to work with Deputy Kerrane on this, we would be open to that because it is about delivery for people.

I also wish to briefly address Deputy Bruton’s comments. We want to have a fit-for-purpose retrofitting system. With regard to local authority housing, the problem in Louth County Council is the fact that its maintenance budget is too low because there is insufficient money from the Government.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I often wonder what type of mentality would allow a system that requires somebody to be unemployed and on jobseeker’s payments for more than 15 months before qualifying for the fuel allowance to remain in place for so long. How petty is that? The fact that this provision has remained in place and is in place in the midst of a global pandemic speaks volumes.

This motion is very simple. It is about allowing people who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic to get support for their heating bills. It is about giving them the fuel allowance and extending the fuel allowance to as many people who need it as possible. It is also about increasing the payments for two weeks in February for all people in receipt of the fuel allow-

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ance. It is very simple and just. It is a small token on the part of the State to recognise the difficulties that people are experiencing. Once again, this is about choices. Many people will look at the Government's response to this motion and at the choices it has made. The Government made a choice to increase the carbon tax again, a tax that will affect lower-income families and workers disproportionately. It made a choice to increase the salary of the Secretary General of the Department of Health by €81,000 and to appoint God knows how many additional special advisers at exorbitant rates of pay. It also made the choice to increase the pay of its Ministers of State, but it chose not to support our student nurses.

The Government has made the choice not to support this motion. The amendment from the Government is embarrassing. Essentially, it confirms that the Government is tone deaf when it comes to the reality for people who are facing the crisis of their lives as a result of losing their jobs during the pandemic. I commend Deputy Kerrane's motion to the House. I urge Deputies to reject the Government's amendment and to stand by the people who need a little support in this crisis in their lives.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I support Sinn Féin's motion. We strongly believe that the issue of fuel poverty and the current fuel allowance system require further interrogation. The Labour Party has carried out an analysis of this year's fuel allowance payments arising from budget 2021 and I would welcome the Minister's response to that analysis, if she can respond to it. It is our contention that in real terms there has been, in effect, a cut to the fuel allowance for 2020-21. The reason we are saying that is because the fuel allowance is paid over 28 weeks from the end of September through to March. Due to Covid-19, the 2019-20 fuel allowance season was extended by an extra four weeks. This would have been worth €98 to recipients, because four weeks multiplied by €24.50 is €98. In 2021, the payment increased by €3.50 a week from January, which would be worth an additional €98 over a full 28 weeks. However, only 14 of the weeks in this year's fuel season will be paid at the higher rate, which means they will only get €49. That signals, in real terms, an actual cut in the fuel allowance. That is the Labour Party analysis. I would welcome a response from the Minister in respect of that analysis because if she agrees with it, and I mean this respectfully, that would blow the Government's argument regarding the policy roll-out on the fuel allowance for 2021 out of the water. It effectively means that people on fuel allowance this winter will be down €49 compared with the 2019-20 season, and next winter they will also face more expensive fuel due to the higher carbon tax. We are on record as saying we are not against the carbon tax but it means people will be worse off in 2021. The Government will say that there is no carbon tax increase by €7.50 per tonne until May, but thereafter that will hit.

The Minister also says it is for individuals to seek supplementary welfare allowance and that community welfare officers will not be found wanting when it comes to exceptional needs payments. That has been my experience in my constituency. The system that is set up to allow for payments for exceptional needs has, in my experience, continued to be a robust one and that level of discretion is, thankfully, there. We welcome that. However, the figures show that, in spite of the Minister's contention that supplementary welfare allowance can be paid and is available in exceptional circumstances, between January and December only 11,922 people received the fuel supplement or the heat supplement. In the context of the overall spend and the numbers that are in receipt of fuel allowance, one would have to contend that 11,922 is quite a small number of people to have benefited from that additional payment. That speaks volumes about the continuing level of fuel poverty that exists within this State.

I do not doubt the Minister's bona fides. When we are arguing these points in opposition,

we all subscribe to rhetoric. There is no question about that. There is scope to look at the fuel allowance again, perhaps to look at the Labour Party analysis of the real-terms impact of the cut, and see whether the supplementary welfare allowance could be examined afresh with a view to ensuring that more people are notified and made aware of its existence. The 11,922 people who availed of the payment in December and January is a small number relative to the 300,000 plus in receipt of the payment. That is our core point.

I want to speak to the element of the motion that deals with the PUP, and it not being a qualifying payment for the fuel allowance. We are seeing a growing phenomenon in our constituency offices of people who are feeling the effects of long Covid. I appreciate that the science in regard to measuring the effects of long Covid might not be up-to-date but the phenomenon of long Covid and its effect on people is widely accepted. There is a sufficient evidence base in that regard. The enhanced illness benefit is the current payment that meets the needs of those people, as I understand it. I ask the Minister to undertake a budgetary analysis of people who are suffering the effects of long Covid and to design a payment that would include provision for a fuel allowance to meet the needs of households with people who had been working but are no longer able to work because of the long-term physical effects of Covid. That would be a stringent exercise. I merely want to it put on the record of the Dáil today in relation to the Minister's agenda. I am asking her to look afresh at measuring the long-term impact of long Covid and to examine if additional supports can be put into that budgetary line, including a potential provision for fuel allowance payments where there is a fuel poverty marker in a given household.

I accept the points made by Deputy Bruton but the people I am meeting are not in a position to be able to avail of the supports that have been articulated by him. Whatever about local authority programmes and the progress in that regard, which I acknowledge, the people who have availed of Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland grants in respect of the extensive work that needs to be carried out on the housing stock are people who do not have the means and cannot access loans to bring their houses up to the required standard such that fuel poverty is extinguished. There is still a significant gap in the housing stock that is plugged, by and large, by the fuel allowance. I understand and acknowledge that progress is being made but it needs to be accelerated. While that acceleration of enhancement of buildings and housing stock is under way, eligibility for the fuel allowance should be looked at again, if at all possible. I acknowledge that the number of people in receipt of the fuel allowance is significant, but if it could be looked at afresh, particularly in regard to those people in fuel impoverished houses, that would be widely welcomed.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I am sharing time with Deputy Whitmore. I commend Deputy Kerrane and Sinn Féin for bringing forth this motion. I acknowledge that across this Chamber there is nobody, be that in opposition or in government, who wants to see a scenario in this country where people are cold. This motion seeks to address a very simple but cruel reality, namely, that in our Republic, people are cold. Often in this Chamber we can get lost in the adversarial nature of politics and it becomes a Punch and Judy show between the larger party of Opposition and the larger party of Government. If we step away from that, we will recognise that some of the organisations that have been advocating on behalf of the many people in our country who are cold have absolutely no agenda or axe to grind. They are not seeking to replace Government. They are standing for and advocating for people because of the reality that those people are cold. That is the very simple nature of this issue.

I want to mention some of the organisations that have written to the Minister and which have aligned themselves under the banner of the National One Parent Family Alliance. The So-

ciety of St. Vincent de Paul wrote to the Minister at the start of January asking for an increase in the fuel allowance payment for January and February because people are cold. That organisation is not doing so to be oppositional. Nor is Single Parents Acting for the Rights of our Kids, SPARK, which advocates on behalf of one-parent families. Such families are consistently among the most vulnerable groups in this country. Nor are the National Women's Council of Ireland, Barnardos, Free Legal Advice Centres or the Children's Rights Alliance seeking to be oppositional. Those groups have organised themselves under a banner because of the fact that, in our Republic, people cannot meet their heating bills, as a consequence of which they are cold. To alleviate that discomfort, they are having to make cruel choices between heating their homes or feeding themselves.

We need to step away from the adversarial and get down to the nub of the issue, which is that in our country today, people are cold. We need to look at some of the measures we have been asked to implement to alleviate that suffering. Some of them are really reasonable. I do not doubt for a second the Minister's bona fides and the work her Department is doing. There are solutions that are being advocated, not just by Sinn Féin in its motion, but also by civil society groups that have no stake in terms of how we organise ourselves politically in this country.

The motion includes the simple proposal that the Minister extend the fuel allowance to recipients of the PUP. People have found themselves out of work who might otherwise never have experienced the need to seek welfare. They get cold just like anybody else. The requirement that a person who loses his or her job must be in receipt of a jobseeker's payment for more than 15 months before he or she qualifies for the fuel allowance makes no sense. Does the person who has lost his or her job not suffer from the cold for 15 months? That is an illogical practice which, when one breaks it down, seems somewhat cruel.

The motion proposes the establishment of a discretionary fund for Covid-19 utility debt, with an initial allocation of €5 million to assist people with heating and electricity costs. I accept the Minister's rebuttal on that point, namely, that the Department does not place any band on how much the State can give for this purpose. However, I would argue that a discretionary budget of €5 million seeks to rectify the fact that more people are spending more time in their homes than ever before, including children learning at home on their laptops, where those devices are available. Not everybody has them. People are not allowed to leave their homes. A discretionary budget would operate in the period of Covid, where increased utility costs are arising in a situation that is different from any other time.

The motion also proposes that the Minister would ensure that the budget for exceptional needs payments is sufficient and that there is access to, and flexibility from, community welfare officers. On this point, the Minister highlighted the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, of which 11,400 people are availing. In a report from 2019, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul highlighted that more than 400,000 people in this country are experiencing energy poverty. That only 11,400 are availing of the supplementary welfare allowance scheme suggests there is a problem. From talking to people, one of the problem is that having to go into a welfare office and justify one's poverty is difficult for many. Another problem is that people are not aware of the scheme. Many people who are suffering, whether from welfare poverty or poverty in general, which is all-encompassing, do not know such schemes exist because they are not being advertised and brought to their attention.

In the time remaining to me, I ask that we all take off our Opposition or Government hats and recognise that people are cold. If we need to get around a table collectively to seek to

remedy that, let us do so. It is unbecoming for a republic to have a scenario where people are having to organise collectively in civil society to address these types of issues and that we are having to have these debates. Let us get on and address the issue.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank and acknowledge Sinn Féin for bringing forward this important motion. We have heard a lot today about the current situation and how the Covid crisis and fuel poverty are impacting on people in a very real way. I would like to talk about our future in regard to fuel poverty. Unfortunately, the Covid pandemic is going to be just one of the crises we face.

11 o'clock

We are also going to be facing a climate crisis and fuel poverty, and how we address these will be key in meeting our obligations.

Two central tenets of any just transition model, which is exactly what we need now and in future, must be that climate action does not fall disproportionately on low-income households and that resources to mitigate climate change are equally shared across all sections of society in a sustainable manner. Those on low incomes at home and abroad are more likely to feel the impact of climate change such as flooding and drought and be exposed to air pollution, poor water quality and water contamination. We can prevent this by poverty-proofing climate action in the country and by establishing a just and fair transition model.

In 2018 the Society of St. Vincent de Paul commissioned a report on this issue and revealed that several factors contributed to energy poverty in the country. It noted that increases in energy prices disproportionately impacted on low incomes. It also found that there was a limited uptake of energy efficiency schemes among low-income households due to a lack of awareness or education and that energy efficiency standards in the private rented sector remained inadequate. I am pleased to acknowledge the comments of Deputy Bruton on tackling the rental sector. It is often the case that the subsidies are only taken up by those who can actually afford to make the necessary investments. We tend to leave out the working poor or people living in private rented accommodation facing current levels of high rents or those whose income has significantly reduced due to the impact of Covid-19 on the economy. While budget 2021 did increase the fuel allowance and allocated €100 million to residential and community energy efficiency, it really is not enough to address the persistent energy poverty that our communities face.

There is also an increased allocation to the warmer homes scheme and the national retrofitting programme, which is welcome. However, there have been growing calls for something more comprehensive.

To fund a larger programme, the Government could commit to reviewing the subsidisation by the State of fossil fuels and instead phase out those tax breaks and subsidies that are environmentally damaging. In its budget submission, Social Justice Ireland estimated that approximately €4 billion per year in taxation between 2012 and 2016 was foregone through potentially environmentally damaging subsidies. While such subsidies undermine much of the impact of our other environmental taxation measures, they are also unproductive and would be far more useful if the related funding was used to invest in the energy needs of people, households and communities, especially those most vulnerable during transition.

As part of a just transition model, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has called for protec-

tions for low-income households and vulnerable customers from energy price increases, an improvement in access to, and take-up of, energy efficient schemes, and an improvement in data and research on energy poverty so that supports can target the most vulnerable. Investing in support of financing schemes and the roll-out of trusted energy advisers at a community level will also be required to educate people about their energy options. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul notes that a review of subsidy schemes in other European countries identified energy consultants who can increase awareness and confidence of Government schemes. We need schemes with wider eligibility and we need to review how mechanisms from existing schemes, such as better energy homes, can support an increased uptake of schemes by low-income households.

Ultimately, what is being advocated by NGOs is that when we make the transition to a zero-carbon economy, which we absolutely must do, we make sure people on low income can afford their minimum energy needs. This can be achieved by ensuring people have an adequate income, controlling the cost of utilities for low-income households as we make the transition to renewables, expanding access to free energy efficient upgrades and investing in public transport and rural transport.

The impact of Covid-19 can be viewed as a test of the economic disruption that we want to avoid as a country as we transition to a zero-carbon economy. The motion reflects on the circumstances facing those most vulnerable during the pandemic and who we should continue to protect as we emerge from Covid-19. This is actually an opportunity for Government to establish a template or just transition model by addressing first and foremost energy poverty in the country.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Dáil is debating the issue of fuel poverty. From time to time the Dáil has debates of this kind. Usually, they do not generate much passion or many column inches in the newspapers, which is perhaps not surprising because very few Deputies and few enough journalists suffer from fuel poverty. That is not the case, however, for many people living in this State. It is a scandal that in 2021, in one of the richest countries on earth, one in six suffers from fuel poverty. The State does not take enough action to tackle this problem; in fact, in many respects the State worsens the problem. Let me give the House two examples.

The first example is of the State not doing enough to tackle the issue. If we were to take 157,000 houses across Cork city and county and raise their BER ratings to B2 or better, it would cost €380 million each year. The State spends €40 million annually on the warmer homes scheme. An initiative such as I have outlined would create 7,000 jobs and lift 25% of those households out of fuel poverty. That is the kind of initiative that is needed rather than the pitiful efforts in which the State is engaging.

I will give an example of how the State is worsening the position. The ESRI said on 19 June last year, and this is a direct quote, “Carbon taxation is found to be regressive, with poorer households spending a greater proportion of their income on the tax than more affluent households.” What does the Government do? It proposes a carbon tax not just kicking in in May 2021 but year on year, every single year, for ten years. What effect will that have on fuel poverty in this country? What effect will it have in being what the ESRI described as a regressive tax? Will it take more people out of fuel poverty or push more people into fuel poverty? To ask the question is to answer it. We need bold policies to tackle the climate crisis in this country, but carbon taxes, which are ineffective and which alienate large numbers of people from a progressive green agenda, are not part of the solution, and those taxes should, in our view, be scrapped.

Particular issues have been raised by the pandemic. I wish to draw attention to the double whammy of individuals or households who have lost their jobs or who have maintained their jobs but lost some income and now work from home. The income is down, in some cases way down, on the one hand and, on the other hand, the heating bills, particularly in the winter months, go up in order for these individuals to be able to work from home in something other than freezing or Arctic conditions. I support all the positive proposals in the motion to address this issue but I would go further and say two things. First, there should be no cut-offs of electricity, gas, etc., for people who fall behind on their utility bills, especially in this situation of a double whammy in the pandemic. Second, there should be an audit of energy debt. What debts have people built up as a result of this double whammy of having their income slashed and having to work from home? There should be write-offs for people who are not wealthy: ordinary people, working people and middle-class people. Those debts should be written off in this situation.

I make the point that utilities, including utilities that are not 100% in private ownership, are now operating to market mechanisms. They are operating to mechanisms which look at the maximisation of profits or the positive side of the balance sheet and without sufficient concern for social needs. In addition, there are fossil fuel companies that have a vested interest in acting against the climate agenda and extracting maximum profit from fossil fuels that can only damage society and the future of the human race. For these reasons, we need to break with the market model of for-profit utilities and fossil fuel companies that operate on the basis of maximising profit. In practice, that means taking these companies out of private hands and bringing them into public ownership on a democratic basis, under democratic control, workers' control and workers' management. The companies should operate in the interests of society and speeding up a genuine just transition in this country and internationally.

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important issue. I acknowledge the work that has been done in expanding the fuel allowance and the timeframe in which it has been allocated to people. The reality is that this winter has been particularly tough on many people who could not leave their homes to exercise and warm themselves up, especially older people who are cocooning. This winter has seen significant stress on many people because the fuel allowance they were being given was not enough to cover their costs.

The amendment tabled by the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, who is accompanied by the Minister of State, refers to better homes energy supports for people who are on the fuel allowance. I wish to concentrate my few words on where I see that creating difficulties. There is currently in excess of 18 months' waiting time for those who apply for the scheme. The scheme itself is very simple. The application form is two pages long and very simple, but it is sent to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, and nothing happens for up to two years. I got figures from the Department last week which show that there are probably in excess of 12,000 people who are still to have their homes inspected. There are several questions that arise in this regard. The homes of many people who applied in 2019 still have not even been inspected. We are talking about people coming out of fuel poverty by making their homes better equipped and more energy efficient. That is not happening in a timely fashion. We cannot blame Covid for this because the problem predates Covid and continues to be prolonged.

The scheme should be taken away from the SEAI and given to local authorities, which have the expertise to operate it. They are delivering disabled grants, housing aid for older people and mobility adaptation grants. They have that experience and they can deliver the scheme at a local level. They are currently delivering schemes without significant waiting times. That should

be considered and addressed immediately.

As the anticipated number of houses were not improved last year or the year before, is that unspent money being carried over and added to the new announcements or is it just being lost and replaced by new money? It is very important to ensure that whatever money is allocated is spent. I have no faith that the money is being spent in a timely fashion at the moment.

Another issue with the scheme is the fact that people who were supported under a previous scheme to install attic insulation but who could not install cavity insulation because their homes have solid walls are now excluded from the additional grant aid now available in respect of external wall insulation. Those who benefitted previously cannot apply again. As such, their homes remain in the fuel poverty trap. If we are to have a just transition and bring in carbon tax, we need also to make sure that we keep up to speed with the retrofitting of such houses. They should be retrofitted in a manner and at a speed that keeps up to date with the issues that arise.

When giving out money or grants, it is very important that people are not told there is money available and given a big global figure. It is necessary to show how that money is being spent. We need to make sure it is getting to people as quickly as possible. I know the SEAI was reviewing the scheme to see how it could go be extended to applicants who had previously been successful but may not have availed of the full suite of measures required to increase one's building energy rating, BER. A BER should be done prior to the works being carried out and another should be carried out afterwards in order that we can see that there was an increase in the energy efficiency of the house. That is very important.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Last January was the coldest January in the past ten years. Sub-zero temperatures are again forecast for the coming weekend, which means the cold will be eating into many people's homes around the country. Right around Ireland, people are choosing whether to heat their homes or feed their families and whether to turn on the heating or purchase clothing for their families. It is incredible that such choices are still being made in this country in 2021, at a time when this is one of the richest countries in the world.

Through no fault of their own, the incomes of many people have collapsed. Many people, particularly those who are self-employed, have had their ability to earn an income deleted due to Government mismanagement of the Covid crisis. I know of a woman who stays in bed for a longer period each day in order that she will not have to turn on the heating in her house. With many people staying at home because they are working from home or have lost their jobs, there is far more pressure in this regard. Heating is a far bigger proportion of the weekly spend in family homes than it was previously. The Minister need not take my word for it. Recently released figures for CO₂ show there has been a 6% decrease in CO₂ overall, but in housing there was a 9% increase in the level of CO₂ generated last year. That is proof positive that there has been an enormous increase in the level of heating of homes.

Even before Covid, Ireland had an extremely high level of fuel poverty. In 2019, EURO-STAT stated that Ireland had the highest increase in gas prices and the fifth-highest increase in electricity prices across the EU. Just before Covid, it was estimated that 8% of the population, or 393,417 people, were experiencing fuel poverty. That is incredible. The Minister should think about that. Some 393,417 people were in fuel poverty across the State just before Covid hit. That came about under the Governments in which she has been involved in one shape or another for the past ten years. It is absolutely ridiculous. It makes no logical sense that a person must be in receipt of jobseeker's allowance for in excess of 15 months before qualifying

for fuel allowance. I ask the Minister to explain to me and to those 393,000 people the logic of that. Heating is an immediate issue. It is not something that can be postponed until a person qualifies under the Government's regime. During these unprecedented and extraordinary times, we in Aontú believe these rules have to be scrapped. Anybody who has been made unemployed as a result of the pandemic should have access to the fuel allowance. I welcome the Sinn Féin motion. However, I will say that the rate of fuel poverty in the North of Ireland is estimated to be at 42% of the population, according to the Department for Communities in the North of Ireland. Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party have one thing in common: none of them is doing enough to tackle the scourge of fuel poverty in the jurisdictions in which they have power.

There are three major influences on fuel poverty. First and foremost, there is income. Income has an immediate effect over the ability of a family to provide heating and that is why it is imperative that this Government addresses income in the form of fuel allowances and other supports to families.

The second influence on fuel poverty is the cost of energy and here, too, the Government is a complete laggard. I have raised this issue with the Minister for years now. All across Europe, people are reducing their energy costs with the microgeneration of energy. In the North of Ireland, roofs are festooned with solar panels. Each of those families is plugged into the grid, earning income for that electricity and, as a result, they save on energy costs at that moment and earn an income to offset energy costs for heating their homes in the winter time. Ireland, this jurisdiction, is the only jurisdiction in the EU that still has not one microgeneration project plugged into the national grid.

The third major influence on fuel poverty is the energy efficiency of homes. Ireland has been glacial in rolling out the deep retrofitting of the housing stock. It has been absolutely glacial. A Government with real ambition on fuel poverty and the environment would be significantly ramping up the insulation of homes across the country.

Deputy Michael Collins: The carbon tax increases introduced in budget 2021 are punitive for the most vulnerable and anti-rural due to the hikes in the prices of petrol, diesel and oil. The measures included in budget 2021, such as the increase in carbon tax by €7.50 per tonne, will mean an extra €150 per year to fill a diesel car and €130 per year for a petrol car until 2030. I have a young lad below in west Cork. He told me the other day that his car insurance has gone up by 134%. How is this young man supposed to stay on the road with these huge increases in the cost of fuel and insurance? It is an extra burden on the people of rural Ireland.

The hike in carbon tax will also considerably impact the price of home heating oil until 2030. The Green Party, backed by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, is shoving these taxes down our throats. However, if one has to live in rural Ireland, one needs oil heating. One also, in all likelihood, needs fuel, coal, wood and turf. What does the Government expect us to use if we cannot use any of those products? The Green Party has wonderful dreams but it is giving families no alternative. Should we tell people to sit in their houses with their coats on? People do not have the money for extra taxes. We need an increase in the fuel allowance. Look at the people over 66 who were still working when Covid-19 hit. They were not working for the joy of it, they were doing it because they had no choice. There has been not one extra brown cent for those workers over 66. This Government would want to wake up and realise that these are the people who built Ireland. I wonder how many people woke up this morning wondering how they are going to pay their ESB bill. I wonder how many woke up cold. Has the Minister any

idea what it is like to sit in a house week in, week out during a pandemic and not have enough money to heat the home?

Recipients of the PUP should receive the fuel allowance and we need an increase in all of those allowances. They should be more easily accessible. Data indicate that some 28% of householders in Ireland are in energy poverty and that some 400,000 people go without heating at some stage because of the cost. The available payments, such as the fuel allowance, do not cover many of those affected. The increases in costs associated with home heating oil will, therefore, make the situation worse and increase the issue of fuel poverty.

The Minister said this morning that we should redirect people to her Department. The red tape attached to this means it is not viable. I talk about warmer homes and Deputy Canney spoke about it previously and he is right. There is a two-year waiting list. It is outrageous that people who want an alternative and are willing to make the move are still finding the fences impossible to jump to get their homes. I know many people in west Cork, in places such as Bantry, Skibbereen, Clonakilty and Bandon, who come to me. We have been filling out these forms for the past two years. They contact me again and I ask "Are you coddling me?" when they say nothing has happened. We cannot get our homes insulated and get the job done. I look at the warmer homes scheme that was being laid out in Bantry. When it was first made available, people like Finbarr O'Sullivan ran meticulous projects insulating elderly people's homes and so on. What did the Government do? It pulled those jobs. Those people have no jobs. Five jobs have been lost in the past few weeks.

The time for talking is over. The Green Party has dreams but I call on it to come up with a reality for the people on the ground.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I fully support this motion on fuel poverty and am delighted to speak on the matter. It is particularly relevant to the midlands region from which I come. The Government does not seem to know or care about that region. That is the truth and that is the message that is coming through to my offices from constituents.

If we want to talk about poverty, then this Government needs to get real sooner rather than later. It needs to demand a total and complete reassessment of the so-called just transition process which is a grave injustice to the people of the midlands. This process is on the verge of driving hundreds of Bord na Móna workers and up to 17,000 people in our horticulture sector into unemployment because of the hare-brained ideas that this Government is standing over and willing to support to the detriment of people in the midlands who are on their knees.

The midlands is a region that has always suffered inequality. It has the second lowest rate of disposable income in this State and yet the Government is not waking up and seeing the harsh realities and struggles of the people, workers and communities who are being left behind. We have no alternative jobs or alternative fuel sources and it is absolutely ridiculous to have such an injustice imposed on people. That is what it is. This could be done in a much more gradual way when we have an alternative fuel source. This reassessment should be carried out by the Government but should also involve Bord na Móna going back to the drawing board and reapplying for a licence to recommence peat harvesting. We were all, including the workers, of the view that they had until 2030. These are people with mortgages who need to put food on the table. They are real people who are being sacrificed because of so-called Government policies. Does the Government realise that this country only accounts for 0.1% of the world's emissions? Yet it expects the midlands to save the planet. That is the ideology here and it is absolutely

crazy.

I want to make it clear that these workers are being let go, left without jobs in the middle of a global pandemic, and there is no empathy for them. As I have said before in this Chamber, workers, enterprises and communities are being left behind. There needs to be alternative employment and alternative fuel. I call on all midlands Deputies here today to put their money where their mouths are because otherwise their statements will ring hollow. There needs to be an urgent reassessment of the just transition process.

It is ironic that the people who will lose their jobs as a result of the decision made by Bord na Móna will not be able to access the fuel allowance until they are in receipt of jobseeker's payment for over 15 months. It is unacceptable that people in receipt of the PUP cannot receive the fuel allowance. There is a complete inability to enter into the experiences of people who have little income and must worry about how they are going to heat their homes. I support the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, suggestion of a national policy review on energy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I also want to say that it is an insult to the people of Offaly-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Carol Nolan: -----who are now going into shops and workers and families of workers-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I am going to go to the Deputy's colleague, Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad of the opportunity to talk on this important matter. I support the call for the increase in the fuel allowance and to allow others on social welfare to access the fuel allowance. As has already been mentioned, 15 months is too long for someone to wait if he or she cannot afford heating.

My real problem is with the Government and its policies that increase the cost of fuel, coal and briquettes and put them out of the reach of ordinary people who are on social welfare or the old age pension. Those people have to count every penny as they go. Briquettes were among the available forms of heating. Women, young and old people picked up a couple of bales of briquettes that were easy to handle and clean, and provided good heat. We are being told by the Government that we will not have them any more in a couple of years. It is saying it will be four years before they are finished, but I think it will be a lot sooner than that. The Government is driving people to use electricity. It says electricity is the way to go and that we should have electric cars, but does the Government not realise that the cost of electricity has gone up? The Government is promoting electric cars, yet we are told it will cost €26,000 to put a kerbside charging point in a housing estate. Does the Government stand over that? Then the Government tells people they cannot cut turf. Where I come from, people went out into the countryside and they were proud to cut turf in the summer time and to dry it and bring it home. They were proud to cut timber and put it into a shed to dry before they used it. They were proud to sit in front of their fires, which kept them warm, going back decades and centuries. The Taoiseach is following the Green Party out the gap like a dog following a flock of sheep. He is doing everything it tells him. Last night we heard the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, boasting that we are going to lead the way. I remind him that we are a small country and if we

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were to turn out the lights and leave this wonderful country we are living in, it would only make 0.13 of 1% in the overall context of reducing carbon emissions. We are all under the one sky. Is this what the Government has done to rural Ireland?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: If it is, the Taoiseach will never be heard of again. If he stops the people in Kerry-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith ag an Teachta.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----and rural areas from cutting turf-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are eating into the time of other Deputies. We are moving on.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The people of Ireland-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Healy-Rae is eating into other people's time. I call on Deputy Fitzmaurice of the Independent Group.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I support and welcome the motion. However, it should be made clear that, unfortunately, Governments do not listen often enough to motions in here. I assure Deputy Danny Healy-Rae that whether it is the Green Party, Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil, given what is going on in this country at the moment it is like the Chihuahua pulling the Great Dane's tail. The Green Party is dictating the pace. I assure him that it tried once to stop us cutting turf and it failed, and it will not succeed a second time if it tries anything. I say that loud and clear to the Green Party. We know that the carbon tax has gone up and that people in rural Ireland are basically hit with double taxation at the moment. People do not realise that the Government is trying to bring in a Bill to stop exploration for oil and gas. We need to realise that the gas that is coming in from Europe goes through the UK and we know the situation that has developed there at the moment. Whether we like it or not, we have no security of fuel now in this country. Even if we have all the wind turbines in the world, we will still need the gas plants to run at 50%. We need to get real. No more than with electricity, we are now pushing the country to danger levels with energy supply. There is also a situation developing regarding peat. Bord na Móna has closed down bogs but private contractors used to rent land from it, which ensured that ordinary people in rural areas got enough turf for their own fire. Instead of hiding behind some of his staff who are lower down in Bord na Móna, Tom Donnellan needs to clarify what is going on there.

I got a phone call this morning in the constituency I share with Deputy Kerrane from a person who is living in a social house. The house is heated by electric heaters and with the PSO levies adding to the cost of electricity, it costs €75 per week to heat. The person wanted to know if there is any new type of heater that would help or if the council could do something. Retrofitting is important and we all support that. Every mechanism to reduce the consumption of energy is fully endorsed by everybody, but the reality is that it comes at a price.

In fairness to the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, last year she extended the fuel allowance for an extra period. I acknowledge and welcome that. I hope that the same is done again. My concern is that if it is extended for the rest of the year, with the way the Green Party is pulling the tails of the other parties, we are going to be living in a country where people

will be looking out a half door but they might not live too long because they will be perished or they might not have electricity. We are putting this country at risk at the moment and we must call for that to stop. Everyone believes in doing things better and in trying to be more efficient, but one cannot cut off one's nose to spite one's face just to dot the i's and cross the t's for one's parliamentary party and say one got this through because it was in the programme for Government.

The peat briquettes are available from Bord na Móna until 2024 or 2025. I have been told by about 20 people in the past week that loads of them are coming in from Germany. The Government can be proud of itself that that is happening at the moment. Loads of milled peat are coming in now from Estonia and some other countries for the horticulture sector. The Government can be proud of itself that there is a boat now bringing it across, even though we have it beside us. It is like telling the Arabs that we will sell them oil. This is the country that we are now shaping to be. We tell everyone that we are great. We are so clean and we are so green, but no more than the Mercosur deal that some of them are twisting and turning about voting for now, the reality is that in Europe and in Ireland we seem to be happy to import everything and say we only used it here, we did not dig it up out of the ground or we did not do this, that or the other. A bit of cop on is needed at the moment. This runaway train will be stopped. I assure the Green Party that the moment this pandemic is over-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: -----as soon as we can stand up, the people of rural Ireland will show the Government-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I call Deputy Pringle.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: -----in Dublin the anger they have over what it is doing.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion today. I have previously spoken about fuel poverty in Donegal and there have been many studies, reports and papers on the continuing issue of fuel poverty in Ireland. Five years ago, Unite the Union published a report entitled, A Cold Christmas, which examined the rate of fuel poverty on a county-by-county basis. It followed the release of results from the CSO survey of income and living conditions, SILC, on deprivation, poverty, and household income. One of the questions in the survey was: "Have you ever had to go without heating during the last 12 months through lack of money...have you had to go without a fire on a cold day, or go to bed to keep warm or light the fire late because of lack of coal-fuel?" At that time, more than 700,000 people across the Republic answered "Yes", and 30,700 of those respondents were in Donegal. The report found that Donegal had the highest level of fuel deprivation. Donegal also has the lowest level of household income across the country.

In 2019, Social Justice Ireland reported that almost 400,000 people in Ireland experienced fuel deprivation, while Ireland was also ranked among the top five in a EUROSTAT report for energy price increases. It seems that fuel deprivation and energy poverty have been a significant problem in Ireland forever. Detached houses in rural areas with inappropriate or no insulation and our cold climate have created an environment where people are cold and unwell due to insufficient heat in their homes. That was all before Covid-19 hit. Since this time last year, the world has been turned on its head, with economies, industries and countries closing down while a deadly, contagious pandemic spread across the globe. The pandemic has wreaked havoc on

employment. In Ireland, in the middle of this third level 5 lockdown, almost 500,000 people are in receipt of the PUP, a newly introduced social welfare payment for those who lost their jobs, permanently or temporarily, due to Covid-19.

The motion states: “a person who loses their job cannot access the Fuel Allowance until they are in receipt of a Jobseeker’s payment for more than 390 days (over 15 months)” and that “the Fuel Allowance is not available to recipients of the PUP.” Not only are more people unemployed now than ever, but more people are working from home. Those of us lucky enough to have a home have higher household costs due to work, home schooling, multiple tenants working from home and so on. This motion is timely and important.

The stress, anxiety and uncertainty of the pandemic is not something that we can control, but the Government does hold the purse strings and can take certain measures to help residents across Ireland. It was a long, dark and cold January and granting the fuel allowance to people in receipt of PUP is one easy step which should have been taken immediately and would have alleviated it.

I commend Senator Lynn Boylan on the Living in Energy Poverty report which followed an online cost of energy survey at the end of last year. Almost 300 people responded to the survey and it is very important to hear their real-life experiences and personal stories. Too often public policy and legislation are discussed in a vacuum and we just look at costs and figures rather than the quality of life of residents around Ireland.

That said, it is important to collect, collate and analyse data to ensure that Government programmes are meeting their objectives. I have often said that I wish this Government was not reactive but proactive. In that vein, I was reading *Spending Review 2020: Social Impact Assessment – SEAI Programmes Targeting Energy Poverty*, published by the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, IGEES, in October 2020. The paper looked at the SEAI’s Better Energy Homes and Better Energy Communities schemes but found that the level of data collected was insufficient to provide an assessment of the schemes’ impact on recipients. It was not possible to determine whether the schemes brought recipients out of energy poverty. It is hard to believe that we would spend money without trying to determine if it is having any effect. Then again, perhaps it is not so hard to believe when one considers what else this Government does not ask questions about.

Apparently, there is a CSO-led project to establish indicators for energy poverty in which the Department will be participating. This project is expected to provide an evidence base to improve the targeting of energy efficiency schemes and for a future, updated social impact assessment. The IGEES report also states that the Department and the ESRI are undertaking research which includes “an examination of the impact of retrofitting on alleviating energy poverty”. This is happening after the event and after the work has been done. Unsurprisingly, the SEAI does not record the building energy rating, BER, of homes before works undertaken under the warmer homes scheme. This creates such a dearth of information on the extent of fuel deprivation and energy poverty throughout the country.

Why is the Government funding programmes but not having the impact of programmes properly assessed? Some charities, NGOs and other civil society groups would have their funding stripped if they were not providing an accurate impact analysis and evaluation of the outcome of expenditure. The IGEES report suggests that assessment information could be used to assess the schemes’ impact on taking recipients out of energy poverty and on the broader co-

hort who are considered to be at risk of, or experiencing, energy poverty. I suppose it is better late than never.

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): I thank Deputies for an engaging discussion on the very important issue of fuel poverty. As outlined by my colleague, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, we want to ensure that we provide the types of supports which offer help to the people who need it most. We want to avoid the use of untargeted measures which do not sufficiently prioritise and target those most in need of the relevant supports to ensure that expenditure on such measures provides the maximum benefit to those in specific need.

To date we have spent more than €10 billion on Covid-19-related income transfers, including in excess of €5.5 billion on the PUP scheme to more than 820,000 individuals and about the same again in payments in respect of wage subsidy schemes to in excess of 440,000 people. It is important to reiterate the findings of recent ESRI research which showed that the PUP and the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, have been effective in cushioning families at the lower end of the income distribution table from losses and have largely absorbed the impact of income losses for the bottom 40%. The Government has extended the PUP and the wage subsidy schemes until the end of March 2021 and will continue to monitor the position, ensuring that these schemes will remain in place as long as is necessary.

The Government is committed to supporting those on low incomes with their home heating costs through the fuel allowance scheme and other supports. Just four weeks ago on 4 January, the most recent increase to the fuel allowance payment took effect. The increase of €3.50 per week took the weekly payment to €28, the highest weekly rate ever for the fuel allowance, meaning that each qualifying household will receive €784 over the course of a year. This season more than 372,000 households will be supported with this allowance at a cost of more than €300 million. In 2020, taking account of the prevailing weather conditions and the Covid-19 crisis, the fuel allowance season was extended by four weeks to support qualifying households further. The current season is due to end on 9 April, but as in previous years, the Government will consider extending the season if prevailing economic and-or weather conditions necessitate it. An estimated 465,000 households receive support with their electricity and gas bills through the household benefits package throughout the full year at a cost of €265 million annually. The household benefits package is specifically targeted at those who are 70 years old and over and is a non-means-tested payment.

In budget 2021 the Government committed that one third of increased carbon tax revenues would go towards boosting the incomes of the poorest in society. There have been some incorrect comments made on this today and I want to make clear that specific targeted increases in social welfare payments, outlined by the ESRI, were implemented with a view to ensuring that the poorest in society would not be hit by increases in carbon tax. It is the case that those who are worst off are benefiting financially from the transfer of carbon tax increases to social welfare payments. The ESRI identified three key payments from the Department of Social Protection which could help to channel carbon tax revenues towards those most in need, namely, the fuel allowance, the living alone allowance and the qualified child allowance. These measures are ensuring that the carbon tax is working as an anti-poverty tool for those most in need. That might not be popular but that is the reality. From January the living alone allowance has been increased by €5 to €19 per week at a cost of €57.5 million, providing critical additional targeted support to more than 220,000 customers who live alone. Also from January this year, qualified child allowance payments have been increased by €2 per week, from €36 to €38, for children

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under 12 and by €5, from €40 to €45, for children aged 12 and over. It is estimated that this will benefit 419,000 children who are most in need.

In addition to the support schemes I have mentioned, the Government provides targeted supports to people facing exceptional costs or experiencing financial difficulties through the supplementary welfare allowance scheme. Payments are made under this scheme in respect of exceptional heating costs, and in excess of 2,000 such payments were made in 2020. It is important to reiterate that the budget for the supplementary welfare allowance scheme is not capped and is operated in a discretionary and flexible manner by community welfare officers who can judge each case based on individual need. Schemes such as the supplementary welfare allowance facilitate specific targeting to ensure that resources are available to those most in need. The Department actively promotes the availability of supplementary welfare allowance payments via its web and social media channels, Intreo centres, citizens information centres and Money Advice and Budgeting Service, MABS, offices. I would respectfully ask all Deputies and those listening to this debate to spread the word about the availability of the supplementary welfare allowance if they really want to support people who are having difficulties covering their fuel costs.

I have highlighted the range of other income supports by way of acknowledging that fuel poverty is not a stand-alone issue but rather a manifestation of income poverty. Thus, it is important to look holistically at the range of supports available to households to try to alleviate poverty in all of its forms. However, the focus at all times must be on tackling one of the root causes of fuel poverty, and it is imperative to acknowledge that if we are to achieve long-term sustainable reductions in household energy costs, we must improve the structural insulation issues impacting on the cost of heating homes to tackle fuel poverty in a meaningful way. This is why one of the Government's key commitments is to support the retrofitting of Ireland's housing stock, which ultimately reduces fuel and heating costs and is better for the environment in the long run. In line with programme for Government commitments, this year will see the largest budget for retrofitting in the history of the State. Our emphasis is on cutting energy costs over the medium to long term so that in the future there will be less need for reliance on short-term measures such as the fuel allowance. Our prioritising of retrofitting as a means of tackling fuel poverty is clear from the 82% increase in the budget available this year to the SEAI, with a total budget of €221 million in 2021.

Deputy Barry mentioned a figure of €40 million for the warmer homes scheme but that is not correct. The budget for this year is almost triple that, at €109 million. The warmer homes scheme is being ramped up very significantly this year. The scheme supports those on lower incomes to retrofit their homes to reduce their energy bills sustainably and permanently. In addition, through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, we have committed funding of €65 million in 2021 to support the retrofitting of up to 2,400 social housing homes. Providing funding for these types of initiatives is critical to ensuring that we reduce fuel poverty in the long term.

I also think it is an opportune time to mention a relevant initiative supported by the Minister's other Department, the Department of Rural and Community Development, which is of particular relevance to today's topic. I refer to the Community Call initiative. This was set up at the beginning of the pandemic last year as a collaboration between State agencies and the community and voluntary sector to ensure the most vulnerable and isolated got the support they needed. In every local authority area, there is a Community Call helpline which helps to connect people with local groups that can help with the collection and delivery of essential items,

including fuel, for people who are particularly vulnerable and isolated. It also assists people who are feeling socially isolated or medically vulnerable. I mention this initiative because there may be people who are not accessing the fuel they need or, indeed, the payments they need due to difficulties caused by the pandemic or the associated restrictions. Again I say it is important that we, as public representatives, are aware of these helplines and that contributing organisations are still very much available for those who need them. Some of the earlier examples cited today with regard to isolated older people and, in particular, those living alone do not really recognise this aspect of poverty or the reality and complexity of poverty.

I acknowledge Deputy Whitmore's mention of a just transition. Other Deputies also mentioned it. This will be a key principle informing the work of the Department. I want to acknowledge that. It is incumbent on us all to work together to provide the necessary supports to those in our society who need them. In that spirit, I reiterate my request to all Deputies to promote the availability of the supplementary welfare allowance. There are 63 Intreo offices open across the country for people who are in financial need at this difficult time.

I want to pick up on a couple of other points. Deputy Sherlock asked about the two fuel allowance seasons and suggested the allowance was lower this year. He is comparing apples with oranges because this fuel season is not yet complete. Last year's was exceptionally long and this one may also be long. That is the difference; this fuel season is not yet complete. Deputy Tóibín mentioned the capacity of microgeneration to reduce fuel costs. He is absolutely correct. I am glad to announce that a public consultation on microgeneration is ongoing. The area has great capacity.

I acknowledge the passion for rural Ireland shown by Deputies Nolan, Fitzmaurice and Danny Healy-Rae. I only have 30 seconds and I need to say a couple of other things. I have heard the Deputies and we are listening to them. It might surprise them to learn that we are more approachable than they might think. I am of rural Ireland myself. I know they need to make some points today but I ask them also to talk to us. We are amenable and we understand the issues about which they are talking.

The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, highlighted earlier the range of supports provided by the Department, which is working to alleviate poverty for those most in need and doing so in a targeted way to ensure supports are provided where they are most needed. The Government is committed to ensuring this remains the case. The Minister has committed to meeting the NGOs to which reference was made today with regard to their concerns about fuel poverty. I thank Deputies for their engagement this morning. It is important that we ensure these vital targeted supports are in place for those who most need them and, accordingly, I commend the Government's amendment to the House.

Deputy Mark Ward: An old Dublin saying from the tenement days - "first up, best dressed" - describes how those in a family who got up first thing in the morning had a better chance of being fed for the day. It is now a hundred years later and nothing has changed. Anyone who is on the PUP should be getting fuel allowance. They have been put out in the cold by Covid and they should not be cold at home. Our proposals will benefit not only those on the PUP, but also those who have lost their jobs, lone parents, carers, older persons, persons with a disability and widows. Many of them already receive fuel allowance but we are seeking a double payment for them in February to get them over the hump of this cold weather.

Last week, more than 475,000 people in this State received the pandemic unemployment

payment. That is 475,000 people who have lost their jobs and their income from work. Many are now struggling to pay their bills, get food on the table and stay on top of paying for their daily needs. No one should be forced to choose between having a warm home and eating. That is the stark reality. In my own constituency of Dublin Mid-West, I have received countless calls from people who are struggling. These are families who have never experienced such hardships before and who cannot get a break from banks or mortgage providers without incurring unjust penalties.

One of the few positive things to emerge from this crisis is the rallying together of communities. The resilience of our communities has been pushed to its extremes but they have continued to support the most vulnerable among us. In my own community, the food bank has become a necessary and essential service for those who have to avail of it. A steering group has been set up by community groups in Clondalkin including Neart le Chéile, the Quarryvale Community and Youth Centre and youth services in Clondalkin and Ronanstown. This group currently supports the basic food needs of 350 adults and children per week without any Government intervention.

We urge every Deputy in the House to support this motion so that parents do not have to choose between feeding their kids and heating their homes. The Minister of State, who is a member of the Green Party, spoke about the carbon tax. This will only push people further into poverty and cause more problems down the road.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I have listened to the Minister and many of the speakers this morning. There are more than 48,000 people on the PUP in Cork alone. I have heard the Government speakers talk about the living alone allowance, the exceptional needs payment - let us get it right, the exceptional needs payment is only a once-off payment - the other payments and the retrofitting scheme. These speakers are missing the point. This motion is about giving families and workers a bit of a break. We have an emergency and we are asking for emergency measures to be put in place to support the people of our country.

I heard some rhetoric a while ago. The Government is worrying about everybody else. It should stop trying to score political points. This is about public representation in the House. We are elected to represent the people outside the Houses. We hear this rhetoric and are told that the Government has spent A, B and C. That is taxpayers' money, the money of the people of the country. The Government should not try to fool people outside the House by saying this cannot be done. It was done for the banks. The Government did not have to make excuses but rather bailed them out. Who is bailing people out now? It is the taxpayer once again. The money the Government has borrowed to cover these payments will have to be paid back. Who is going to pay for that? It will be paid for by the same gang the Government is hitting with its tax on the PUP. It is not listening to the people outside the door who have lost their jobs. Banks are unfortunately not playing ball with mortgage holders. We hear this every day in our constituency offices.

People are poor. A friend of my family has a disability and has had a heart attack. He is lucky enough to live on his own. Every day he goes to a bus stop to sit and talk to people. He then gets on a bus to stay warm before getting off in the next town or village where he does the same thing again. He does this all day and all night until he gets home. That is the reality of what is happening in this country. We are talking about a temporary measure involving a minuscule €28 a week. Let us get our heads out of the sand and do the right thing. The Minister should listen to and support Deputy Kerrane's motion.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I am bitterly disappointed with the Government's response to this motion. There is nothing new at all in its amendment. I have read the real-life stories of people who are struggling to pay their bills. There is nothing for them in this amendment. I have repeatedly raised the issue of fuel costs with the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. My first ask related to the 15-month rule. This means that if one loses one's job tomorrow, one will typically get €203 in jobseeker's allowance. This can represent a very great reduction in one's weekly income but one must wait 15 months for assistance with one's fuel costs. Neither Minister made reference to that issue. I have asked the Minister about this 15-month rule on two previous occasions and twice she has told me that she has looked at it. Despite this, she did not mention it today.

If the supplementary welfare allowance is available and is doing fine and if it is what we should be pushing, why are ten organisations on the ground, including lone-parent organisations, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Children's Rights Alliance and Barnardos, calling for more? They are saying that what the Minister is doing is not enough. I have just searched the allowance on Google, as many listening at home would if they were struggling, and there is no mention of help with fuel costs or utility bills. The first line of the article I have found says that one can apply if one has no income. Where is the Minister publicising this? She needs to publicise it more. Is it publicised in the offices? Most offices are closed so people cannot see that. I ask the Minister at least to roll out some information so that people know the allowance is available because people are not aware of it.

12 o'clock

There is nothing new in the Minister's amendment. The only new announcement for PUP recipients is that they are going to face tax bills. That is it. I appreciate that the Minister has said there is a cost in what we are proposing. I know that, but what is the cost of taking no action? We know that this State is spending billions every year dealing with poverty but we are taking no action on this. The Minister has spoken about the fuel allowance and about household benefits packages, neither of which people on the PUP can access. Hence the whole point of this motion in the first place. The Minister has taken exception to the €5 million fund. That is an ask from those very ten organisations that I have met and that I welcome that the Minister has said she has met. That is their ask; it is not a Sinn Féin one. It is coming from those people on the ground who are saying that what is there is not enough.

In response to Deputy Bruton who spoke a great deal about the type of heating that houses are using, that is well and good, but the reality is that people cannot afford to change their type of heating. When the Government keeps increasing the carbon tax, which will be increased by €7.50 in a few weeks, that makes it even more out of reach for people. They cannot afford to change their heating systems. I take exception to what has been said on the carbon tax increases and the non-impact that these will have on people. The Minister has a report by her own Department that tells her that the incoming increases and future increases in the carbon tax will impact low-income households disproportionately. I will send the Minister that report, although I can see her shaking her head. It is there in black and white. This is an issue that has been raised over and over again.

Reference was made to the warmer homes scheme. Again, this is great, but there are more than 8,000 people on a waiting list for that. I was speaking to a lady the other day and she has an application in since July 2019. Yes, those schemes are great, but if people cannot access them and are waiting nearly two years just to hear back, then that is a problem.

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I ask the Minister to reconsider the position on utility bills and costs. This is not just coming from us and, in fairness, the Opposition is totally united in telling the Minister that there is a problem here, that workers who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own and the families of those workers are suffering. They are struggling with these bills and we need the Minister to take action on them. That is the ask.

The double payment of the fuel allowance in February has been done before. It will cost approximately €20 million and will help people who are already in receipt of the fuel allowance who are struggling to meet their heating bills because more people are spending more time at home to comply with the public health restrictions. This means that they are using more electricity and heat. We need to take action on that. What the Minister's amendment is suggesting is that the Government is spending a great deal of money on the PUP and on the employment wage subsidy scheme, and that is fine. What we and the organisations on the ground are saying to the Minister is that this is not enough. The cost of doing nothing is far greater than the cost of €200 million to take action. I ask the Minister to look at what we have done in the North just last week. A one-off payment of £200 was made to recognise in some way at least how people are suffering in the midst of this global pandemic and to take some action to help those workers and families who the Minister has decided here today she is not going to help. That is a great shame.

Amendment agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: The amendment is agreed.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: It has just been agreed. The amendment was put and nobody dissented.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Vótáil

An Ceann Comhairle: A division has been called and, in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the scheduled weekly division time, which I understand will be organised later during the course of the Order of Business.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Last week the Government announced its quarantine proposals for those travelling to this country. The Taoiseach described this plan as a system of mandatory quarantine. I told him at the time that it was nothing of the sort. The proposal the Taoiseach outlined was at best a form of self-isolation relying on the discretion of individuals but it certainly did not amount to a system of mandatory quarantine. It was a half-baked plan that did go far enough in protecting our people and it certainly falls short of what we need now to assist us in the fight to achieve maximum suppression of this deadly virus.

When I put this to the Taoiseach last week, he was adamant that his plan was well thought out and that the Government was in control of the situation, and he denied that this was a half-measure. I have to tell the Taoiseach that anybody watching the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, on

the television last night will be disabused of any notion that the Government has any idea as to what it is doing on quarantine. It is absolutely incredible that at a time when we are at the deadliest stage of this pandemic, the Minister for Health has stated that the Government's quarantine proposal now only requires a person to stay at home and that he or she does not even have to isolate in a single room. The logic of that is that the individual can interact with members of his or her household, who then in turn may venture into the public space, meet with others and run the risk of spreading the virus.

It is very alarming to see that the Government is still at sixes and sevens here, all of which underscores the fact that its quarantine proposal was not thought out at all. Indeed, the Minister, Deputy Donnelly could not give a date for when the Government's very limited system of hotel quarantine would come into operation.

It is now six weeks since the far more infectious UK variant of the virus was identified here. I put it to the Taoiseach last week that his flawed plan was not alone too limited but that it would take a long time to get up and running. Again, he dismissed my concern saying that: "The measures on travel will not take weeks to implement; they will be implemented very quickly." However, the Minister for Justice has now contradicted him and has made clear that it will, in fact, be weeks before the legislation is introduced.

This is all incredible, not least because the issue of quarantine and international travel is not a new one and we know that the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, repeatedly raised concerns regarding international travel, concerns which were ignored by the Government except for the establishment months ago of an expert group to consider approaches to quarantine, yet here we are. What precisely was this group doing for those months? Where is the urgency and sense of purpose from the Government on this critical issue at this extraordinary time as we do battle with this virus?

We were notified of 101 deaths yesterday, a historic low point for us in this crisis. We are seeing the emergence of new strains of this virus and we have a vaccination programme which is still very much in its infancy. We also know, because the CMO has said it publicly, that we still do not have the testing and tracing capacity to hunt down this virus with the kind of speed that we require. Our ICUs are under enormous pressure and again the virus is taking its toll in our nursing homes.

It is for all of these reasons that we need a mandatory system of quarantine. I ask the Taoiseach to drop the half measures, to opt for this full system of mandatory quarantine and to bring the legislation to that effect to the House with all urgency.

The Taoiseach: I accept that the Deputy's thinking has evolved significantly regarding the issue of travel, and I think that would be true for most Members of the House. The Deputy, as early as last November, was clear that the return of people to Ireland to meet their families was something which should be welcomed and facilitated. I think she used the phrase "For them, coming home this Christmas is an essential journey". We have learned clearly with the variant now that the situation is much different and far more perilous in terms of our behaviour, because the variant now constitutes about 70% of all cases in this country. How we behave in this country will therefore be critical in suppressing the incidence of the virus and keeping it down at low levels.

As I said last week, measures have already been taken regarding travel. The Garda has had

checkpoints at the airports already and those are continuing. Fines have been issued to people in breach of the level 5 regulations, whether they have been travelling abroad or coming in from abroad. Those actions have happened. Regulations have been signed to give effect to those aspects, and to increase the fine from €100 to €500. Regulations regarding mandatory quarantining, particularly concerning specific countries, on the advice of the CMO will also be introduced.

Legislation will be introduced to the House quickly. We would appreciate the support of the House in getting that legislation through. Mandatory home quarantine is important. There are legal and enforceability considerations here as well, as well as public health advice. The public health advice concerning self-isolation will continue in specific cases. Policing people in their bedrooms, however, raises obvious challenges. The concept of home quarantine is important in suppressing the virus. About 50% of the 800 people who came in yesterday would have been Irish citizens travelling back in from holidaying abroad.

The measures we have brought in, including the obligation to have a negative polymerase chain reaction, PCR, test, for example, are having a deterrent effect. The two-pronged strategy consists of, first, deterring people from travelling into and out of Ireland, including Irish people travelling on holidays, and, second, protecting people from any new variants of the virus which emerge over time and which would be worrying from a public health perspective. We will be guided at all times by the CMO in adding countries to the quarantine list or in strengthening the quarantining provisions. Travel into the country has collapsed, however, and our objective is to keep it at very low levels for the foreseeable future, bar essential workers and the entirety of the supply chain, which it is particularly important to protect.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Self-isolation has always meant isolating oneself in a single room. Many people who have been very sick fought this virus while isolated in a single room. What the Taoiseach and his Government are now describing is a very loose, very sloppy and very inadequate response. It is one which relies on the discretion of the individual, but does not even ask for full self-isolation. It is suggested that a person landing in Ireland can go back to a household, mix with others and then run the real risk of spreading this virus and, potentially, new strains of it. Gardaí cannot, of course, police every bedroom or home in the country. We are not asking them to do so, and neither should the Taoiseach. Therefore, not alone is it necessary to have a system of mandatory hotel quarantine, but it is also the efficient and reasonable request to make of the authorities of this State. It is a no-brainer.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. I thank Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I cannot understand the Taoiseach's resistance on this issue. The clearest message that can be sent to non-essential travellers to stay away is mandatory quarantine. Why in God's name is the Taoiseach resisting something which is so obviously necessary?

The Taoiseach: There are compelling legal reasons it is not possible to do what Deputy McDonald is suggesting. That is particularly the case in respect of Irish citizens coming into the country. Regarding having the capacity to home quarantine or, indeed, to self-isolate, those people must be facilitated in that context as well. There are legal issues in this regard as well. We have our Constitution, which has a clear framework concerning personal liberties and freedoms.

Balancing is required, therefore, in respect of getting something in place which can be robust in resisting legal challenge. It must be remembered that throughout the pandemic we have had legal challenges, of one kind or another, regarding measures we have introduced. We had to defend ourselves against airlines early on regarding the advisories which we issued in respect of reducing non-essential travel. We were successful in defending our position.

In coming to a framework on quarantining, we want to make absolutely sure that we are on a firm footing on public health grounds and legally.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach, but his time is up.

The Taoiseach: That is an important input. Having said that, we are willing to work with other Members of the House in getting procedures which are as robust as possible, because I believe in prolonged suppression of the virus and in getting the numbers down to the lowest level possible and keeping them there. I will work with people in achieving that objective.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Quite honestly, I do not think anybody knows what the Taoiseach is saying. What exactly is he talking about regarding travel? I have consistently said that the failure of this Government and the last Government to address the issue of travel has been the biggest single failing in the response to Covid-19. At no point have we had a coherent and effective system to address the threat posed by inward travel. As my colleague said, this virus does not come in on the wind; it comes in via people travelling on planes and boats. We have never had a serious attempt to tackle that aspect.

At this point, people are getting pretty fed up of all the sacrifices they are making. Life is very difficult for everybody at the moment. People expect that the Government will play its part in doing the things it should be doing. I refer to having proper testing and tracing in place and ensuring we have effective restrictions to drive down the virus to a very low level, which we did last summer. People also expect the Government to deal with the issue of the importation of the virus. The Government has not done any of those things adequately, and that is why we are in this situation now. We are in a third wave, without any prospect of getting out of it for the foreseeable future. The Taoiseach is not setting out any pathway ahead and no strategy is in place to deal with this situation.

What exactly is the Taoiseach talking about regarding restrictions on travel? The question of mandatory hotel quarantine is absolutely essential and we should be doing that for everybody. I cannot understand why the Taoiseach will not go with that policy, which has proved so successful in other countries where it has been operated. He just has not provided any explanation in that regard.

What does the Taoiseach understand the term “home quarantining” to mean? Two of his Ministers - the Minister for Health last night, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs today - have conveyed very confused understandings of what that term means. In the context of international travel, therefore, what does the Taoiseach mean by the term “home quarantining”? What are people being expected to do? Whatever about having home quarantining to reduce community cases, the point here is that we are talking about international travel and the threat of new and stronger variants of the virus which we do not know anything about. What does the Taoiseach mean by “mandatory home quarantining”? How does he see that working? What is the requirement for somebody sharing accommodation with family or housemates? How does the Taoiseach see that working, and how does he see it being policed?

The Taoiseach: I disagree with the Deputy's assessments of the Government's responses to the pandemic. We are in an unprecedented era of the most draconian measures regarding people's movements and personal liberties that we have ever experienced. We are in this situation because of a global pandemic. That is in respect of the level 5 restrictions which we now have in operation regarding people's personal movements. We now have Garda checkpoints at airports restricting people and penalising those in breach of the level 5 regulations. This is absolutely unprecedented. We are going to put in place hotel facilities to facilitate mandatory quarantining for people who come into Ireland from countries such as South Africa, Brazil and the UK. On the advice of the Chief Medical Officer a person will have to take a mandatory PCR test if he or she has not taken one in advance of coming into the country. It will be an offence not to do that. For home quarantining, people will have to stay within their homes. This will be enforced by An Garda Síochána and others.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Will it be in their rooms?

The Taoiseach: How do we police someone in his or her bedroom?

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I ask the Taoiseach to answer the question.

The Taoiseach: I ask the Deputy to answer that question in the context of common sense and practicality around enforcement. That said, the public health advice on the specific circumstances of cases will apply to people as they apply across the board. They are very clear issues. There is a balance to be struck in us getting it right around personal freedoms, legal enforceability and sanctions. We are taking comprehensive legal advice on this as well as ensuring that we get the numbers down for travel into the State and that there is an effective quarantining system. There is legislation and regulations that have been passed, for example, the removal of short-term visa free travel into the country from many countries has already happened and been regulated for. All of that will have an impact on numbers coming into the country and it is having an impact already on the numbers coming in. Deputy Shortall said it has been a consistent failure, but Deputies from her party have stood up in this House and criticised the Government around the lack of supports for airports and for airlines on the basis of our policy of being so restrictive on foreign travel. The Deputy cannot have both ways in that respect.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is not having it both ways.

The Taoiseach: In response to the issues, I have outlined that this will be a very severe regime for the quarantining of people. It involves the quarantining in hotels of people from certain countries where there is a particular concern around the importation of the variant and home quarantining of Irish citizens and people more generally, with follow up in terms of enforcement.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Taoiseach has not answered any of the questions I asked him. His point about support for the airlines is nonsense. Of course we need to support airlines and airline workers if there are serious controls on travel. Throughout last year we had advice to self-isolate, which did not work. We know there was not any enforcement of this and that there was no serious system in place. This changed to restrict one's movements. We know there was no policing of that and it did not work. In Christmas week the Government was advising people to self quarantine at home. We know how that ended. None of these things is enforceable. When I asked the Taoiseach how exactly would quarantining at home work he did not answer the question, but he talked about people's rights and not being able to police what goes on in

homes. This is exactly what we have been saying. This idea of home quarantining is unenforceable. The Taoiseach has admitted this himself. What is he talking about? The Taoiseach mentioned personal freedoms.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Everybody is paying a huge price in the curtailment of their personal freedoms.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Deputy, but the time is up.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Taoiseach needs to put a system in place of mandatory hotel quarantining so that we have some prospect of people being able to exercise personal freedoms and so we can have some element of opening up the country to normality. That can be done with a zero Covid policy. It cannot be done-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Shortall please, the time is up.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: -----with a confused plan that the Taoiseach has now.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we hear the Taoiseach, please?

The Taoiseach: With respect, the Deputy is a very late convert to zero Covid. The Deputy has been see-sawing around the place from the Opposition side.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is not true.

The Taoiseach: It is true, and I can point to some of the Deputy's contributions on that.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Please do.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy certainly did not oppose the lifting of the measures at the beginning of December. The Deputy certainly did not oppose them in the Dáil-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: A number of us briefed-----

The Taoiseach: I want to say, if I am allowed to speak, that people have adhered-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: -----at the beginning of December-----

The Taoiseach: The vast majority of people-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Will the Taoiseach explain-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Shortall, will you allow the Taoiseach to respond?

The Taoiseach: The people have adhered, by and large, to the restrictions. When one makes something illegal and a penal provision is made, it has an impact in people's behaviour. It has had an impact on people's behaviour. Consider mask wearing, for example. I pushed very hard to make mask wearing compulsory in public-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Will the Taoiseach-----

The Taoiseach: -----but we were told it would not be enforceable. If we brought it in for public transport, we were asked who would enforce it. Would it be the bus drivers or the gardaí

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and all of that kind of stuff? I heard all the problems about it. It was enforced from day one by the people. The people themselves adhered to it.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up.

The Taoiseach: Likewise, this measure will have an impact.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Taoiseach said it would not be enforceable.

The Taoiseach: I said in respect of the bedroom that it was not enforceable and the Deputy deliberately twisted it in her response. Home quarantining can be-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up, please.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: What are we talking about? Is it going into a house?

The Taoiseach: Home quarantining can be more readily enforceable than just swinging into somebody's bedroom, and the Deputy knows this.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are going ahead now, and we will hear from Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: People Before Profit was not a latecomer to calling for mandatory quarantine or for a zero Covid strategy. We have been calling for this for months. Yesterday we saw that Ireland paid a very bitter price with 101 fatalities, a record number, for the Taoiseach's failure to embrace a coherent zero Covid strategy and to impose mandatory quarantine.

I now will address another chronic failure. It is ironic that the Taoiseach referred to workers in his justification for not imposing quarantine and zero Covid. Today is the 300th day of the dispute of the Debenhams workers. This is a group that the Taoiseach has very badly let down and who have been treated despicably by a company for whom they had worked for 20 or 30 years. They have fought an heroic battle to force Debenhams, and indeed to force the Government, to ensure the collective agreement they had for proper redundancies of two weeks statutory plus two weeks for all of those years worked would be honoured. The Government has abandoned them. The Government has insulted them with a €3 million retraining fund, which is just ridiculous. We also have 490 Arcadia workers in Top Shop and in many other stores who now face a similar situation. They have a similar agreement with Arcadia for two plus two weeks redundancy arrangements, and they are facing the prospect of getting only the statutory redundancy and their employers doing the same despicable thing that was done to Debenhams workers.

I want to know, even at this late stage, whether the Taoiseach is going to show the solidarity for workers he implied in his last contribution by, as a minimum, giving the €3 million retraining fund as a direct cash down payment on the two plus two that those workers are entitled to. Will the Taoiseach answer the question the workers have asked, and on which Mandate has written twice to him this month, although he has not even bothered to reply, about the precedent of the Irish Banking Resolution Corporation, IBRC? The Taoiseach said that we could not possibly bump the workers up the priority list of creditors in a liquidation. However, we have happened upon what happened in the case of the IBRC when there was a similar claim made at the time by the a previous Minister, Michael Noonan. It was discovered that €5.5 million had been put aside in IBRC in the wind up of Anglo Irish Bank, which was bailed out by the people,

where they were given an enhanced redundancy arrangement. Guess who the liquidator was then? It was Kieran Wallace of KPMG, which also claims that we cannot do this. Even one of the Taoiseach's own spokespersons has spoken about a statutory fund to assist workers such as this who are shafted by employers and who do not get their proper redundancy.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Even at this late stage, on the 300th day of this dispute, will the Taoiseach do right by the Debenhams workers and the Arcadia workers?

The Taoiseach: I dispute the Deputy's assertion that the Government has not engaged on this issue. It has. I was very clear and honest in our presentation to the workers from the get go. Politically, others created expectations that were never going to be realised within the legal framework available to the Government. The Government is not responsible for the actions of the company. The company has treated the workers very badly. Government is the only party to this entire dispute that has actually fulfilled its obligations, and €13 million has been provided in direct Exchequer support to guarantee the employment rights for statutory redundancy. This gets dismissed by the Deputy and does not even get mentioned. The State is the only player here that has stood up to its responsibilities. It then tried to see if it could do more within the legal framework available to it. We initiated and facilitated talks which were chaired by the chairman of the Labour Court, Mr. Kevin Foley. They concluded in December and he issued a report reflecting the outcome of that process. As a result of that process the Government said it would accept the recommendation to provide €3 million to support career guidance, training, education and business start-ups for former Debenhams workers.

Essentially, what the Deputy is saying is that we should just increase the statutory redundancy for every other liquidation that happens as the way out of this. That would facilitate rogue employers left, right and centre throughout the country to exploit the taxpayer forever in terms of liquidation processes and the employers not fulfilling their legal obligations to workers. Mr. Foley refers to the 2016 collective agreement in his report and states that "it is clear that the agreement has no legal application in 2020". Legally, the Government cannot just top-up redundancy payments from the Social Insurance Fund and the Deputy knows that. He knows the very real legal constraints on the Government, but he has chosen to ignore them and just label the Government as not caring and having no interest. These are false assertions. They are designed and articulated by the Deputy for political ends. That is how he engages in this situation.

In terms of other enterprises, we believe companies have obligations. They should fulfil their collective agreements with their employees - absolutely. From our perspective, the State is open to reviewing legislation with regard to giving further protections to workers and also to strengthen the situation for workers in the general workforce in any way we can.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: First, my only interest is to see 1,000 Debenhams workers, who have gone through an extraordinary struggle and have been treated despicably, get the justice and fair redundancy they deserve. It is similar for the Arcadia Group's workers, another group of workers faced with the same situation because of the failure of this and successive Governments to address this abuse.

I put to the Taoiseach a concrete example. The Irish Bank Resolution Corporation, IBRC, which was bailed out by the people, put a €5.5 million fund of enhanced redundancy in place out of its assets so the workers who earned less than €120,000 could get enhanced redundancy.

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This was despite claims at the time by the Government, similar to this Government's claims, that it could not be done. The former Minister, Michael Noonan, said it could not be done, but it was done. It was done by the same liquidator that is telling Debenhams workers it cannot do it. The Taoiseach must answer that. Why cannot the Government, in the particular context of Covid but also more generally, impose a levy on employers, such as a Covid levy or solidarity levy, to provide enhanced redundancy? By the way, the Debenhams workers paid for their redundancy. They paid €1 million per year for 20 or 30 years. They paid for it and they are owed that redundancy by the State.

The Taoiseach: The two situations are not comparable at all. No *ex gratia* payments were made by the Government in respect of the liquidation of IBRC.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The people bailed it out.

The Taoiseach: None was made by the State at all. The Deputy knows that the Debenhams liquidation is a court-supervised liquidation.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It was the Labour Court-----

The Taoiseach: It is one with which the Government could not interfere. The Oireachtas liquidated the IBRC in an all-night sitting. The Oireachtas did not liquidate Debenhams. There are fundamental differences and the Deputy knows it, but he is being populist in his presentation of the issues.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It was the Labour Court.

The Taoiseach: That is what he is doing and has been doing, with others, since the commencement of this dispute. I do not doubt the Deputy's sincerity about looking after the workers, but he also creates platforms to increase support for his movement. That is in a lot of the approaches he adopts.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Your time is up.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy seeks to apportion blame. The State is not a guilty a party to this. It has upheld its obligations to the workers and, believe me, we tried everything we could within the law to support the workers in terms of facilitating arbitration and so forth. That is our position.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: Previously, I highlighted that University Hospital Waterford, UHW, has the lowest budget and lowest staff-to-bed ratio of all nine model 4 hospitals in the country. Parity of esteem is not extended to this hospital by the South/South West Hospital Group. UHW has just passed the tragic milestone of 40 patient deaths from Covid-19 in one week. Additional emergency morgue capacity has had to be sought. It now has one of the highest numbers of Covid-19 inpatients in the country while continuing to have the lowest number of healthcare personnel available to them. The crisis situation sees patients contracting Covid-19 in hospital while the front-line staff are beyond burnout caring for them.

Additionality promised to this hospital is a mirage. The cardiac care waiting list has doubled in the intervening period of a catheterisation laboratory build saga that has long since descended into the realms of farce. We note discussion of building a new hospital in Cork, despite the significant elective capacity that exists there. It appears that it will take three years to deliver this new hospital, while the second-largest hospital in the south of Ireland can continue to wal-

low in a mire of want and need, with no relief beyond baseless commitments and transparent platitudes.

In the higher education sector, Waterford Institute of Technology, WIT, saw its last new teaching building go through planning 24 years ago. Constrained of capital funding for over 20 years, WIT has defied all the odds to position itself as the leading institute of technology nationally year after year, winning the Institute of Technology of the Year for the third time. It is attended by two thirds of all third level students in the south east and generated over €21 million of the €22 million research money brought into the region last year. Despite this exceptional record, we understand the technological university process appears to have turned negative, with outside political influence wishing to see WIT's leadership credentials dismantled. The Taoiseach, the Government and the line Minister have taken the decision that despite being the institute of excellence in the region, WIT should not be confirmed to retain the headquarters and governance of the proposed new merger structure from the outset. It appears that proven leadership, performance and vision are to be hostages to political patronage, a recipe to deliver the educational equivalent of a half-bred camel rather than the promised thoroughbred racehorse.

The Government's position ignores any analysis or due diligence and probity. It countermands the aspirations of Project Ireland 2040. Considering locating the headquarters and governance outside Waterford will significantly destabilise third level educational efforts in the south-east region and the region's ability to continue to attract and retain high-end foreign direct investment, FDI. Where is the equity and transparency from the Government in respect of UHW and Waterford Institute of Technology retaining the academic lead and headquarters of the proposed technological university in the south east?

The Taoiseach: Unprecedented resources have been allocated to the health services this year, including in Waterford. That will continue, in the context of both Covid-19 and non-Covid health services. There are unprecedented resources across the board, including in University Hospital Waterford. The Waterford catheterisation laboratory project is happening in terms of the tendering process and so forth, and the Deputy knows that. We will see that brought to fruition given that the tendering process is close to completion. The Deputy has been apprised of that with regard to the second catheterisation laboratory. Discussions are ongoing on the progression to seven-day extended hours working on an incremental basis during 2021. We all know Covid has impacted on non-Covid health services across the board and in all hospitals due to the fact that elective procedures and outpatient services have had to be reduced.

As regards the technological university of the south east, the Deputy's comments are unfair. The most important point is that there will be a technological university for the south east. That is critical. People have campaigned for it for years. I recall that when I was Minister for Education I was responsible for the most significant expansion of footprint for Waterford Institute of Technology in terms of acquiring new lands for the campus to develop and expand. The Government is committed to expanding the footprint of Waterford Institute of Technology as part of the movement to university status. It is anticipated that an application for technological university designation will be submitted, under the Act of 2018, by the consortium to the Minister, Deputy Harris, for a decision no later than 28 April 2021. The consortium will then be subject to peer review and the various processes. The consortium is anticipating technological university establishment by 1 January 2022. That is something we should collectively go after for the benefit of Waterford and the south east as regards higher education participation.

No decision has been made on the headquarters for the new university. I have had this dis-

cussion perviously. The most important aspect of this is the critical mass of the technological institute itself. As I said, the Government is committed to expanding the footprint of the existing institute in Waterford and that will happen. All Deputies have been consistent and constructive in pursuing this objective, which is an important objective which we should not undermine in any way because that would be to the detriment of Waterford.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I do not understand why the question of the Technological University of the South-East, TUSE, headquarters is at issue. WIT took in €21 million in research last year while Carlow IT took in about €1.2 million. Delaying a discussion on that matter has made this a very difficult and fraught process and it should not have to be that way. We should recognise where the competencies lie.

It is always different for Waterford as regards any political delivery. We have seen it with the catheterisation laboratory build, which is now going on for more than four years and will take another 56 days for the final tender approval. We would have another hospital built in a different part of the country in the same time. The build time for the proposed elective hospital in Cork, from build to commissioning, is less than three years while we are in a four-year process to deliver a cath lab. We have the same issues about funding for UHW and additionality. Eight consultant posts that were announced have not even been approved by the Consultant Applications Advisory Committee yet. Regarding SFI funding into the Higher Education Authority, €70 million was given last year to higher education but nothing was given to WIT. A programme I brought to the Government for €2.8 million for an X-ray scanner, which was submitted in 2017, is still not approved. Some €193 million was announced yesterday for technology headquarters but again, nothing was given to WIT because we are being browbeaten into a process. I promise the Taoiseach that Waterford will not accept that.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that that second hospital in Cork was announced about five or six years ago and was included in some reconfiguration report. It took some time even for a working committee to be established to consider it. I can tell the Deputy one thing: the cath lab will be built before any movement is made on that hospital.

The real point here is that for years people have campaigned for WIT to evolve into a technological university. That has happened across the country, with the three ITs getting together in Dublin and Cork and Tralee institutes of technology getting together as well. I appeal to the Deputy. There is no necessity to create division here, given that we are on the cusp of WIT becoming a technological university with Carlow IT. That is for the benefit of everybody in the south east but particularly the people of Waterford. It would be wrong now to create division around this.

As someone who has been involved in education for most of my life, both politically and otherwise, I know that what goes on in the campus is the key. That is the central issue here. The Deputy has raised the matter of the headquarters. That is an issue but it is not the core of a university. Waterford Institute of Technology has grown significantly in the last decade and more and will continue to grow but we need to move the language to one of self-confidence and asserting strengths. That will continue to be the case and the Government is committed to expanding its physical footprint into the future. That brings obvious realities with it in terms of more students and staff but, critically, there will also be a greater impact in research and other areas.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: The House has agreed that for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency only, the rapporteur's report on the Order of Business shall not be read out but shall be taken as read. There are two proposals to be considered by the House today arising from this week's business. Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It is not agreed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As the Ceann Comhairle knows, for the last number of weeks we have expressed our opposition to the failure of the Government at the Business Committee to honour a commitment it made to ensure the Covid emergency and the response to it are a standing issue on a severely curtailed Dáil agenda. The Government has refused to honour that commitment, which I understood had been agreed at the Business Committee. Given the dire situation we are facing in ICUs and nursing homes, the huge debate about the Government's failure to properly implement mandatory quarantine and the debate about zero Covid, the very least we deserve is a proper debate on these matters this week in the Dáil. It should be a standing issue on the agenda every week, given the health emergency we face.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I do not agree with the Order of Business. It is unbelievable that in the midst of a pandemic that is worsening in many aspects, there is no time allocated to discuss the Government's response to Covid. An announcement was made last week and no time was allowed to debate it whatsoever. There are umpteen aspects to this, including the fact that we are probably facing a public health doctors' strike very shortly because of the Government's failure to address the valid concerns those essential workers have. It is shocking that we could have public health doctors striking in the midst of a pandemic. The Taoiseach must allow the time. We have to have engagement on this and there are so many aspects to it that adequate time must be provided.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We are in unprecedented times. The Dáil is unique in the world in sitting in an alternative Parliament. We have halved the sitting hours every week and the Opposition has co-operated and accepted this very reluctantly. We have a solemn responsibility to represent the people who voted for us. We have a solemn responsibility in a democracy to hold the Government to account. The very reason we are in this unprecedented situation is because of a public health crisis. We need to ask questions every week. The Minister for Health is on every news and radio channel. He needs to be in this Parliament on a weekly basis being accountable to us as democratically elected representatives. We understood it was agreed that that would be a standing slot for that and it is not on the Order of Business this week. The Opposition absolutely cannot agree to the schedule and at this late hour we appeal again to put aside a slot so we can hold the Government to account and do our job.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Our group is unhappy with the Order of Business too but coming onto this floor every week and wasting time on Questions on Promised Legislation is very unfair to Deputies as well. I ask the Taoiseach to ask the Chief Whip, Deputy Chambers, to be more flexible and understanding at the Business Committee, to try to get things sorted out like we used to and not to have time-wasting on the floor of the Chamber. We could be here for two weeks and the Taoiseach would not answer any questions anyway so it makes no difference but we need more time to discuss these issues.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are two Deputies offering from the Independent Group but

we can only have one contributor. I call Deputy Pringle.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: It is vitally important that the Dáil is what representatives are accountable to. That is where the discussions should be taking place, not on TV3 or RTÉ or anywhere else. People should be accountable here in the Parliament and let everyone see what they are actually saying in the Parliament. That is vitally important. The Dáil is on restricted time as things stand because we are trying to facilitate a national crisis but that does not mean the Government has *carte blanche* to go ahead and do whatever it wants without accountability.

The Taoiseach: Throughout my political life I have been a very strong supporter of Parliament and accountability in Parliament, whether in opposition or in government. I am in here every week. In this country, taoisigh are in Parliament far more than their counterparts in other jurisdictions across Europe. That is a good thing. It is a fact that does not get-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: Is the Taoiseach speaking about China and Korea?

The Taoiseach: No, I am not speaking about China or Korea. I am speaking about closer to the home in terms of presence and attendance at Parliament. In the Dáil, it has been a long-standing feature that taoisigh spend more time in the Chamber answering questions than do their counterparts in other European Parliaments. That is all I am saying.

Deputy Michael McNamara: They attend Parliament sittings.

The Taoiseach: The problem right now is the variant. There is genuine concern regarding the degree to which the variant can transmit more easily. There is concern that we could be plateauing at the level we are at now because of the impact of the variant. That concern is a genuine one. We need to monitor what is going on more generally in various workplaces. That said, every week the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, has been in this Chamber discussing vaccines and addressing issues raised by people in regard to the vaccination programme. As of 31 January, 207,000 vaccines were received, 197,730 from Pfizer and 9,000 from Moderna.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot get into a long debate about it now.

The Taoiseach: Again, the bulk of those have been administered within time. That was dealt with in questions last week and in the previous week. This week, what is envisaged is statements and questions on mental health and Covid. Some 100 minutes fixed debate is provided. That is very important. Many Deputies have raised issues about mental health and Covid and we need to debate that issue. It needs to be debated in the media as well. The media are entitled to engage with politicians in the media as well, if necessary. A further 100 minutes fixed debate is provided for statements and questions to the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, in respect of his responsibilities related to Covid-19. Both are important issues that need to be dealt with by the House as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is it agreed to proceed with the business as proposed?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: No.

Question put: “That the proposal for dealing with today’s business be agreed to.”

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 25; Níl, 19; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>

<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Cormac Devlin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Thomas Pringle.

Question declared carried.

1 o'clock

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposals for dealing with Thursday's business agreed to?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are not agreed. Thursday would have been the logical day, as I see it, to have the promised debate on the Covid-19 response and the public health crisis. It is deeply ironic that the Taoiseach should cite as justification for not having that debate the non-essential travel and work requirements. It is precisely the Government's failure to police non-essential travel and non-essential work that means the situation is dangerously plateauing. We need to discuss that in detail this week and interrogate the Government's policy.

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It is also ironic that the Taoiseach has cited his greater participation in the business of the House when the other issue I have raised for the past few weeks is the fact that the two sessions of Questions to the Taoiseach that normally follow Leaders' Questions are gone. We asked for just one of those sessions to be reinstated, as a compromise, in order that the Taoiseach would be subject to questioning. That was absolutely rejected. The Government is trying to minimise its exposure to questioning at a critical time for the country.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is deliberately distorting what I said. I was responding to Deputy Mac Lochlainn, who legitimately raised issues around the sitting of Parliament and so on. I was not justifying anything in regard to the number of days here and so on. I get the impression that Deputy Boyd Barrett wants to create opportunities to hog the debate himself, to the detriment of many other backbenchers from other parties across the House. He wants to create scenarios where he is getting far more of an input than others.

The Deputy knows that it is envisaged that there will be debates on Covid tomorrow. I do not know why he is just ignoring that reality. There will be a 100-minute debate, with statements, questions and answers, on mental health and Covid, which I think most Deputies in the House believe is a very serious issue which should be debated.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I asked for that debate.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy asked for it, but unless the House sits for 24 hours on the trot, I do not see how he will get everything in. That is just the reality.

Next, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is coming in to discuss the impact of Covid on childcare. There are also 100 minutes fixed for that debate.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The clock is ticking on.

The Taoiseach: I did not raise these issues, Deputy McGrath. Others did, and I am entitled to respond to the assertions that were made by Deputy Boyd Barrett. I am simply saying that the bulk of Thursday's business is to do with Covid issues relating to mental health, children and childcare. After those debates will be the resumed Second Stage debate on the Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2020, and the Order for Second Stage and Second Stage of the Air Navigation and Transport Bill 2020. There will also be a Topical Issues debate, which Deputies want. Back bench Deputies appreciate the opportunity given by those debates. That is what is being provided for in the Order of Business.

Question, "That the proposals for dealing with Thursday's business be agreed to", put and declared carried.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

An Ceann Comhairle: We have 34 Deputies offering for Questions on Promised Legislation. It is highly unlikely that we will even get to half of them. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The negative consequences of Brexit are now becoming readily apparent. So too is the need for the Irish protocol, which was hard won, and the necessity for those protections for the Good Friday Agreement, our all-Ireland economy and so

on. Unfortunately, the misguided approach by the European Commission last Friday has now been seized on by a section of political unionism; ironically, by the same section of people who championed Brexit despite repeated warnings that Brexit would be bad and damaging for Ireland as a whole. Nonetheless, they now use this misstep by the European Commission as the basis to launch an attack on the protocol to attempt to undermine, to unravel and, they say, to have it removed. The united front that we created was successful and necessary in securing the protections for Ireland in the face of Brexit.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up now, Deputy

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I believe we now need calm, cool leadership and that same united front. I invite the Taoiseach to confirm that the Irish protocol and the protections for our island are permanent and firm, will not be unravelled and are not up for grabs.

The Taoiseach: I accept and believe there is a need collectively all round for calm, cool leadership. Certainly, we responded quickly on Friday evening when the Commission made, in my view, a mistake in terms of dealing with the AstraZeneca vaccination supply issue via the protocol and Article 16. To be fair, as soon as I engaged with the President of the Commission she responded quickly and reversed the decision. To me, it was a demonstration of the goodwill of the Commission. There is a genuine desire on behalf of the Commission not in any way to undermine peace or create any difficulties. It was certainly not a hostile act.

That said, the British Government in its wisdom decided to pursue a relatively hard Brexit and to stay outside the customs union and the Single Market. This has necessitated a co-operation and trade agreement. Thankfully, that has been arrived at, and it means no tariffs and no quotas. However, there was always a necessity to create special provisions for Northern Ireland to underpin the Good Friday Agreement and to facilitate access for Northern Ireland industry farming, business and jobs to the Single Market in Europe as well as to the UK market. It is for the benefit of everyone. It does need some changes. We believe that working collectively between the UK Government, the Commission, ourselves and the Northern Ireland Executive we can moderate the impact of this in terms of basic issues that have been raised on all sides.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I am returning to the issue of quarantine. Mandatory quarantine is necessary. Quarantine at home is a waste of time. The new variants are potentially lethal. That is the analysis coming through.

The Health Act 1947 actually gives the Minister quite an amount of power, if we read it. In May of last year, the Minister for Health, the Minister for Justice, the Attorney General and all other relevant Ministers agreed, as a result of a request from the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, to come together to discuss how to bring this about. What has happened? What actions have been taken for the past eight months on quarantine following that request and that group coming together? Will the Taoiseach confirm to the House, after eight months, that they were not doing nothing? I call on the Taoiseach to tell me they were not doing nothing. When, at the latest, we will have this legislation in front of the House? All of us will facilitate it next week for as long as we have to sit.

The Taoiseach: The period in May was during the interregnum Government and the last Government as it dealt with the pandemic. As we know, through the summer months the numbers were low. Most of the representations in this House were with a view to relaxing restrictions and opening up. The overwhelming number of calls in the House were to do just that.

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Deputies were concerned about airports, airlines, employment and so on. Legislation will be introduced quickly and it will be brought into the House.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Is that next week?

The Taoiseach: It will improve this and give greater capacity. I appreciate Deputy Kelly's offer to facilitate the speedy passage of this legislation through the House. In fairness, the Deputy has indicated that he will do so.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Will it be next week?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: In the recent "RTÉ Investigates" programme on homelessness, Natalie told us about how she feels safer sleeping in a tent rather than in emergency homeless accommodation. Last week in the Dáil, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage told us that the national quality standards framework applies to all homeless accommodation, including private providers. On Friday at the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Mr. Brendan Kenny of Dublin City Council confirmed that this is not the case and the private providers are not having these national standards applied to them. Will the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage come to the Dáil and update the record on this? Will the Government move swiftly to ensure the national standards apply to all homeless accommodation, including that of private providers?

The Taoiseach: Of course I will alert the Minister to the comments and the request of the Deputy. I wish to make the point that sustained action has been taken in respect of homelessness and the provision of emergency accommodation. The numbers are coming down. Obviously, we want them to come down further. Certainly, we want to create sustainable housing alternatives for people who are homeless in this country. That is our commitment and objective under the programme for Government.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yesterday, the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, announced the welcome decision - one for which People Before Profit has been campaigning for quite some time - to cease issuing new gas and oil exploration licences. Of course, it then emerges that the gas and oil companies are welcoming this because all the existing licences as well as ones such as Barryroe that are up for extension, renewal or adaptation will continue. This means we will have licences extending to 2034. In the face of a climate emergency, we are actually planning to facilitate the further extraction of fossil fuels with all the damage that does to our environment and future. Does the Taoiseach not believe that we should not only cease issuing new licences but that we should not renew, extend or in any way adapt existing licences to facilitate the extraction of fossil fuels?

The Taoiseach: On foot of recommendations from the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, the intention is to legislatively provide for no more new exploratory licences in respect of fossil fuel. That is a groundbreaking and significant decision, the first of its kind. I do not in any way question the credentials of the Minister when it comes to dealing with this issue in a comprehensive way. There are clearly legal challenges in respect of any existing licences that have been issued.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister can cancel them.

The Taoiseach: In Deputy Boyd Barrett's land, everything is simple and straightforward.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I want it to be effective.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, without interruption.

The Taoiseach: Without question this is a significant milestone in policy terms and a welcome one. Deputy Boyd Barrett should welcome it and not seek to undermine the Minister's objectives in this regard.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: We can all agree that we have a terrible vista at the moment in hospitals and nursing homes with cross infection in all our hospitals and a large number of our nursing homes. The Taoiseach is well aware that I brought antigen testing to NPHET last April. I am an advocate for these tests. Despite NPHET's resistance to them, they are being used informally in hospitals. I know of a respiratory consultant in Dublin who is using them to look after his own staff and his bed allocation. He has done over 50 antigen tests and they completely mimic the results of polymerase chain reaction, PCR, testing. At present in the nursing home establishments there is PCR testing one day per week for staff. That is now due to extend to one day per fortnight. This is totally inadequate. Will the Government look at bringing in antigen testing, rapid screen testing, biweekly into our nursing homes and hospitals for our hospital staff to try to reduce the infection load?

The Taoiseach: The HSE deserves considerable credit for ramping up a very significant testing and tracing capacity, with up to 150,000 tests per week now. I recall people articulating loudly not so long ago for 100,000 tests per week. I stand to be corrected, but my understanding is that 137,000 were conducted last week. However, the Deputy is correct in saying there has been a resistance from the clinical and public health perspective to antigen testing. It is fair to say that those in clinical and public health see PCR testing as the gold standard. They are applying it and using it now. NPHET has advised that it can be used in outbreak settings, in hospitals or in nursing home settings. There has been a reluctance to override the clinical and public health advice on antigen testing to date. The view is that its optimal use now is in the context of outbreaks.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach promised me some time ago that he would meet with Councillor Kieran Bourke and his Fianna Fáil colleagues on Tipperary County Council regarding the scandalous closure of St. Brigid's hospital, in Waterford. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, met them yesterday armed with HSE officials, who said the hospital was closed because it might flood. The existing hospital has been there for 140 years and has never flooded. There are such diatribes and lies coming out of the HSE, and the Taoiseach is hiding behind the cover of that. He has political accountability, as does the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for older people but they are denying the people of Carrick-on-Suir and indeed the Minister of State's constituency access to this wonderful facility. Now St. Theresa's, Clogheen, has been taken up as a Covid hospital and there is no place for people to go for respite or palliative care in south Tipperary because of this reckless closure of St. Brigid's in the middle of a pandemic. My goodness, someone would want to pinch the Taoiseach and wake him up. The hospital is closed in the middle of a pandemic and the people in the surrounding area are denied a perfectly good hospital, and then there is the refusal to meet people. Will the Taoiseach meet with Councillor Bourke and his colleagues?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I call the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy needs to change his tone. His continuing relentless hostility is

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regrettable to have to witness weekly, but that is the way he operates and that is his entitlement. I have refused to meet no one. The Deputy keeps coming in here every week saying I am refusing to meet somebody. I have refused to meet nobody. Obviously, with Covid, we cannot meet people physically.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: A virtual meeting.

The Taoiseach: We can meet people virtually, and I know that Deputy Cahill and others would facilitate that meeting tomorrow morning or whenever else. Deputy McGrath cannot keep on attacking people in a very nasty way left, right and centre and then expect-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. I call Deputy McNamara.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I wish to return again to the issue of antigen testing, which I have raised several times, both before and after Christmas. The European Commission advocated greater use of antigen testing in November. It is being rolled out right across Europe. The Biden Administration has now introduced far greater use of antigen testing in America, including in homes. Here NPHET has finally moved, reluctantly, to a very circumscribed role for antigen testing in the context of outbreaks, and only in that context.

Is there a conflict of interest between being chair of NPHET and being director of the National Virus Reference Laboratory, which has very large contracts with the State for PCR testing? I am not saying there is any subjective bias on the part of that member of NPHET, but there is a clear perception there is objective bias, or a clear possibility of it. What is the reluctance to antigen testing? Whatever opening up will take place in March will have to be done safely, and there is a role for antigen testing in our hospitals, our schools and especially our homes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McNamara is over time.

Deputy Michael McNamara: What is the reluctance in this State to this?

The Taoiseach: The reluctance, from what I can surmise and gather from the discussions I have had, is that NPHET believes the PCR test is gold standard. It believes a lot can be missed through antigen testing. That said, it has now advised that it can be used in outbreak settings. I know that the Deputy chaired the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response, which I presume discussed this, zero Covid and the whole range of issues that were brought before that committee-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: Before the Government wound it up.

The Taoiseach: -----throughout the summer. I do not accept the Deputy's point that there is a conflict of interest between being chair of NPHET and being director of the National Virus Reference Laboratory, NVRL. To be fair to all concerned, everybody has come together in different contexts to help the country defeat and suppress Covid-19. We should accept people's bona fides in that regard. There is a reluctance within the political sphere and within the Government sphere to override this kind of-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I am not an expert on testing or the most-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: Presumably, Biden and Merkel are experts.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputies.

The Taoiseach: No. They have their experts. We cannot just pick and choose *à la carte*. There are structures within the country and clinical and public health advice and-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. I call Deputy Mairéad Farrell.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Two weeks ago, along with 3,500 bereaved relatives of the conflict, I wrote a joint letter to the Taoiseach and to Boris Johnson. The British Government has repeatedly failed to deliver on our rights to truth, justice and accountability. We need a truth recovery process, a proper archiving of lived experiences and an examination of themes and patterns. I ask the Taoiseach to meet with Relatives for Justice and bereaved families and to commit to me here today and to the other 3,500 bereaved relatives that he will do all he can to ensure full implementation of the Stormont House Agreement without delay.

The Taoiseach: Maybe the Deputy's party could do something as well. Maybe it is time for Sinn Féin to help and assist in truth recovery in respect of the terrible atrocities-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Disgraceful.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I am asking the Taoiseach as a bereaved relative.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is shocking.

The Taoiseach: Why is it shocking? Why is it shocking that the relatives of those who were murdered in Kingsmill should get transparency and some truth as to what happened?

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt. I listened and I wish to respond. It is a genuine response. The Deputy generically calls it "the conflict" as if the Provisional IRA and the Provisional movement had absolutely nothing to do with it. "People got killed by accident" seems to be the assertion in the lovely and articulate way in which this is put, but we know the reality-----

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: These are relatives.

The Taoiseach: I know that, and we will do what we can. As a Government we have played our part through the setting up of the Smithwick tribunal of inquiry and we will do more if necessary to bring truth through to what happened, but the Deputy's party must also do more.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A Thaoisigh, más féidir leat, iarraim ort cloí leis an am. I call Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In fairness, in response to what Deputy Mairéad Farrell said, it is a straightforward request to ask the Taoiseach to meet Relatives for Justice. We do not need the side commentary in that regard.

I wish to revisit the Irish protocol. I want to know about the interactions the Taoiseach has had. I accept that the European Commission changed tack when he made contact with it, but has he talked to the Commission since to ensure there is no chance of Article 16 being invoked again? We have had terrible language recently, particularly from unionism and Brexiteers. What interactions has the Taoiseach had with the British Government from the point of view of ensuring, even though there are operational difficulties that need to be dealt with, that the Irish

protocol will be protected? We need to ensure there is no return to any element of-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I call the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: My response is that I have no difficulty meeting any groups, and I have met them in the past, but I do get tired of those who do not come to the table and I believe genuinely that the Provisional movement has not come to the table on many atrocities that were committed in the past. That needs to happen too.

In response to the question about the protocol, yes, there has been subsequent engagement between us and the Commission on making sure this does not happen again and on whether sensible, common-sense modifications can be made to the protocol, which I think has been asked for on all sides. We support that sort of process to get meaningful, common-sense approaches to the operation of the protocol. It has been only about four or five weeks since it was introduced.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I welcome that the just transition commissioner is engaging with peat harvesting contractors, but how are our horticulture industry and our nursery industry going to survive economically without their access to peat and compost? These are essential. Will we find ourselves importing this natural raw material we have in this country for these industries to be able to survive and prosper?

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this incredibly important issue. The Government is asleep at the wheel on this issue that could lead to devastating loss of employment and investment in many rural communities. For example, the Government position on horticultural peat could close down the mushroom industry, which is critically important in my county of Monaghan as well as in other counties. The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, does not have a notion in terms of the real outworking of this issue. I am asking the Taoiseach to intervene and to engage with the peat and mushroom sectors to ensure we do not have a situation whereby peat is being exported from Ireland at a time when-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Did Deputy Cullinane raise his hand to come in on this issue?

Deputy David Cullinane: No. I was the first to come in and put my hand up this morning-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: My question was whether the Deputy put his hand up to come in on this issue. I call Deputy Durkan on this issue.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: On this issue, there is a case that needs to be addressed and that is to reassure the horticultural sector that it is not intended to close it down. If alternatives are available, we need to know about them. I support the points raised by the previous speakers in that regard on the basis that the horticultural area is effectively and essentially carbon neutral.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Cahill has been consistent on this issue for quite some time. I point out to Deputies Carthy and Durkan that a working group has been established by the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Noonan, to examine the future role of peat in the horticultural sector in relation to the long-term solution for peat alternatives for horticultural purposes. I am told that, in the interim, existing stocks are

available to meet current demand. I am willing to meet the interests involved if Deputy Cahill or another Deputy can facilitate that.

Bord na Móna intends to remain active in this area. As Members are aware, it is fully focused on renewable energy, recycling and the development of other low-carbon enterprises. There are challenging issues around climate change and responding to it, and there are no easy solutions to it. I do believe that issues can be addressed through just transition and engagement with the key industries. The Government wants to support the mushroom industry. In fact, we have been ongoing supporters of that industry in terms of its capacity to create employment and, through more research, to create even further employment. I met Deputy Cahill some time ago in terms of the bioeconomy and what research can do for the mushroom industry in that respect. I am open to trying to follow through on that with the Deputies.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Unfortunately, all Deputies have not been reached. Deputy Ó Murchú is at the top of the list. We will leave the list to one side and deal with it tomorrow.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If I could finish my sentence, that would be helpful. I am simply pointing out where we are. There is a list of 28 Deputies, including me, who have not been reached.

Deputy David Cullinane: On a point of order-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: What is the point of order?

Deputy David Cullinane: I wish to raise an issue in relation to fairness of process.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: What is the point of order?

Deputy David Cullinane: The Leas-Cheann Comhairle must accept that I was the first Deputy to put his or her hand up this morning when she came in.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay. That is not a point of order.

Deputy David Cullinane: For whatever reason, my name was not on the list.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not a point of order.

Deputy David Cullinane: It is a point of order because-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: May I raise a point of order?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Tóibín, please. Deputy Cullinane has not raised a point of order.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Cullinane, please. We are running behind time. The Deputy is out of order. It is not a point of order. Does Deputy Tóibín wish to raise a point of order?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I do wish to raise a point of order. I very rarely raise points of order. There was 30 minutes assigned to questions on promised legislation. Every Tuesday,

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one particular Deputy takes up ten minutes of that time-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not a point of order.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: -----and the rest of the Deputies-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not a point of order.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Deputy Boyd Barrett had literally one third of the-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Tóibín is misusing the time.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not a point of order. I am taking no more comments on this issue. Please.

Deputy Thomas Gould: On a point of order-----

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Gould, that is not a point of order.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is now eating into the time-----

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am going to try again. I have resumed the seat to take over. The Ceann Comhairle before me was in the middle of this list. There is a very long list of Deputies which will be held over until tomorrow. The list is exactly as we got it.

Deputy David Cullinane: I do not think-----

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is not a point of order, holding me in regard or no regard.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Leas-Cheann Comhairle is the person-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy David Cullinane: I raised my hand and the Leas-Cheann Comhairle acknowledged me.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Cullinane, please resume your seat. I have no idea what point of order you are making. There is a list here before me. It is exactly-----

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will try to explain for the last time before I move on. I have no idea what point of order is being made. I have a list before me. I worked meticulously to that list. I am putting it there and I am moving on. I ask for Deputies' co-operation.

Oireachtas Members (Economic Justice) (Covid-19) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide, in the interest of public solidarity, for the reduction of salaries of Oireachtas members during the currency of certain restrictions implemented in connection with Covid-19; and to provide for related matters.

The object of this Aontú Bill is to bring about a 25% cut in the salaries of Deputies and Senators during Covid level 5 and level 4 lockdowns. I will explain the reasons I believe this is just and the right thing to do. There are two Irelands at the moment and those two Irelands are radically separated. Ireland is in an unprecedented crisis. One in four workers is currently unemployed. That figure is practically the highest it has ever been in the history of the State. Well over 500,000 workers are unemployed. Hundreds of thousands of people are literally seeing their businesses and incomes deleted. There has been a radical reduction of income right across society. Hundreds of thousands of people are being pushed into poverty.

There is a second type of Ireland and that is the political class. At the same time as the crisis in incomes, the salaries of Deputies have increased. Judges' salaries have increased. Yesterday, I attended the meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, at which the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath of Fianna Fáil, defended an €80,000 increase to a €210,000 salary. He defended that increase at a time when the incomes of so many people are being absolutely trashed.

The contrast between these two Irelands could not be more stark. It is breathtaking that the chasm that exists between those two classes of Ireland is larger now than it ever was previously. It is extraordinary that this type of largesse is happening at the precipice of what will be a massive economic crisis. It is as though the political classes are partying just before the country goes down the tubes economically. We have had a budget deficit of €19 billion this year. It is likely that €35 billion will be added to the national debt of this State this year. That will bring the national debt to a whopping €239 billion. That is one of the highest national debts *per capita* that exist on this planet. It means that every man, woman and child currently owes €47,700. Ireland is a massively indebted country and that leaves us extremely exposed to future shocks. If there is a shock to the economy in three or four years' time and we are carrying this level of debt, we will see exactly the same situation arise as befell this country in 2010, 2011 and 2012.

I wish to raise an issue that has not really been raised by any other political party in Leinster House during this crisis and that is the fact that when Covid subsides - please God, it will do so soon - there will be an economic crisis in this country. The EU will put pressure on Ireland to get its budget deficit in order. Historically, the only way that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have known to get budget deficits in order is to increase taxes on low and middle income workers and to cut spending on public services such as health. If this Government remains in power for the next two or three years, it is likely that it will implement savage austerity in the near future. In the previous crash, there was a logical reduction in the salaries of Deputies, in line with the reduction in income of the rest of society. However, on this occasion, politicians' incomes are actually going in the opposite direction to the incomes of the rest of society. While the savings achieved because of this Aontú Bill reducing the salaries of Members of the Oireachtas are

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obviously small, every single Deputy should be playing his or her part to take on the cost of getting Ireland back on its feet.

There are also questions of governance here. How can politicians properly represent people if they cannot relate to them? It is clear that the Government knows very little about what families are going through at the moment. Aontú has submitted this Bill and, if passed, the salary of Deputies and Seanadóirí will be reduced by 25% during level 4 and level 5 restrictions when pubs, shops, cafés and restaurants are forced to close. Perhaps this will concentrate the minds of Government Deputies on the mismanagement of Covid-19. Perhaps they will start to do a better job on very basic things such as making sure that we have proper management of travel into this country, proper safeguards for our nursing homes and proper investment in the health service in this time of crisis.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I want to say something about the Order of Business. Deputies approached me. There is a pandemic and the closeness of the contact is unacceptable. There is an open and accountable list so the actions of Deputies were distasteful. I will not use the word "allegations". What happened here earlier was distasteful. I will leave it at that.

Children (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Children Act 2001 to permit the publication or broadcast of details pertaining to a person who has been charged with an offence against a child where that child is deceased, and to permit adults who were victims of an offence committed against them when they were a child to waive the anonymity provided for under the Children Act 2001.

I seek leave to introduce this Bill along with my colleague, Deputy Murnane O'Connor. The Bill seeks to amend section 252 of the Children Act 2001. The reason I stand here seeking to introduce this legislation is because of the tragic event that took place some eight days ago not far from this convention centre. A 16-year-old boy called Josh Dunne was fatally stabbed. His death was a terrible tragedy for his mother, Diane, his family and friends, his soccer club, St. Kevin's boys' soccer club, and Bohemians, the club for which he was also selected to play.

Regrettably, none of us will ever be able to see the great promise that Josh displayed not only as a person, but also as a soccer player. His loss is not simply a loss to his family and friends, it is a loss to the whole community.

His death, unfortunately, underlines the fact that knife crime in this society is an increasing problem. We saw earlier today that a woman died in the Mater hospital as a result of knife injuries inflicted upon her on 20 January. There has been a series of knife attacks not far from this convention centre over the past eight to ten days. It is a significant issue. We need to warn society, particularly men and young boys, that it is not acceptable to carry knives. Josh was not carrying a knife but was caught up in a row as a result of someone else carrying a knife.

We also need to introduce stronger legislation. I and Fianna Fáil introduced an amendment to the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act in 2019 to ensure that we could have an increased sentence for people who are caught in possession of knives with intent to cause harm to others.

The purpose of the Bill I am introducing is to seek to amend section 252 of the Children Act 2001. That section provides that in any proceedings that involve a crime committed against a child, the child cannot be identified after proceedings have commenced. The legislation makes perfect sense if the child has been subjected to sexual abuse or has been assaulted. It would obviously add to the trauma of the child if his or her victimhood was going to be publicised in newspapers or the media and it would add to the trauma of the attack already inflicted upon the child. However, it was never envisaged that the provision would apply in respect of a child who had been killed. It never applied to that extent because, until 2019, there was no such understanding of the application of that provision and never was it the case that children who had been killed were anonymised once the case came to trial. As a result of a decision by the Director of Public Prosecution, DPP, in respect of a prosecution, and as a result of a decision by the Court of Appeal on 29 October 2020, it is now the case that in any proceedings where a child has been killed, the child cannot be identified. That has resulted in significant harm and damage being caused. In the first instance, it is a significant issue of confusion for the public. People are informed of the name of a child after that child has been killed. That is absolutely correct because it is such a major issue in our society when a child is killed. Individuals are informed, the public is informed and the child is named. However, once proceedings are commenced, the media cannot identify the name of the child. That leads to absurd situations where a child will have been named in the media for a period of days and then once an individual is charged in respect of the child's death, the child cannot be named anymore. That is one reason why the legislation needs to be changed.

It is also extremely unfair on the families of deceased children that they have to go through this process whereby the memory of their child is being airbrushed from history. I saw on the news the other evening that the mother of an 11-year-old boy who had been murdered was forced to disguise her identity as though she was some criminal who could not be identified in the news. The reason for that was because by revealing her identity, the identity of her dead child would also have been revealed. It is extremely unfair to the families of deceased children that this law is now operating as it is. Part of the reason that Deputy Murnane O'Connor wanted to be a part of this Bill is because she is in close contact with Kathleen Chada, the mother of children who were killed. I, similarly, have spoken to Andrew McGinley, the father of children who have been killed.

I know that the Minister for Justice shares my concern about this matter. I, along with Senator McDowell, have met the Minister and she is agreeable to changing the legislation. We

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need to ensure, however, that this legislation is expedited and that we change the law promptly because it is unfair to the memory of children who have been killed that we allow this law to continue. That is why I am introducing this Bill today.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Seventh Report of Committee of Selection: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the Seventh Report of the Standing Committee of Selection in accordance with Standing Order 34, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 2nd February, 2021, and discharges and appoints members to Select Committees accordingly.

Question put and agreed to.

Finance Act 2004 (section 91) (Deferred Surrender to the Central Fund) Order 2020: Motion

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Finance Act 2004 (Section 91) (Deferred Surrender to the Central Fund) Order 2021, copies of which have been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 12th January, 2021.

At the outset I would like to say that despite the extraordinarily difficult circumstances over the past year, we have successfully maintained investment in Ireland's public capital programme. The programme, which was outlined in the National Development Plan 2018-2027, will continue to address infrastructure deficits in key social and economic areas.

I welcome the opportunity to make an opening statement on the deferred surrender process, which is an important technical instrument to allow the Dáil formally approve the expenditure by Departments and agencies in the current financial year of capital moneys carried over from last year. The ministerial order, which is before the House today, is, as I say, a technical instrument and does not involve any new policy decision or any additional funding allocations. The provision of the capital carry-over facility recognises the fundamental difficulties in the planning, procurement and profiling of capital expenditure and acknowledges that for any

number of reasons, capital projects may be subject to delays. This type of approach to managing infrastructure expenditure makes sense and, thus far, has been very successful. It helps to ensure better project management and to avoid uncertainty in project delivery. The multi-annual system also gives more certainty to contractors that they will be paid for the work they do. The carry-over facility also helps to improve value for money and eliminates the potential for wasteful spending on non-essential works to ensure full capital allocations are spent before the end of the year.

The Exchequer and Audit Departments Act 1866 generally requires the surrender of unspent Exchequer moneys to the Central Fund at the end of each financial year. However, section 91 of the Finance Act 2004 gives legal effect to the carry-over of unspent voted Exchequer capital to the following year, up to 10% of capital by Vote, subject to certain conditions, by deferring this surrender requirement.

Among those conditions are that the amounts of capital carried over by Vote be specified in the annual Appropriation Act of the year from which the carry-over is proposed. The actual decision in principle on the amounts of carry-over by Vote is therefore determined in the Appropriation Act. The Dáil again has the opportunity to endorse the amounts in its decision on the Revised Estimates volume, which shows the capital carry-over amounts separately in the relevant Votes.

The carry-over amounts provided for in the Appropriation Act are required to be confirmed in an order to be made by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform by 31 March of the following year, after approval of the order by the Dáil, to allow expenditure to take place. The order sets out the amounts by subhead consistent with the amount by Vote specified in the Appropriation Act.

It should be noted that the Department of Health had sought a carry-over of €107 million and this sum was provided for in the 2020 Appropriation Act. However, it subsequently transpired that the Department did not have sufficient savings at year end and the carry-over amount has been adjusted accordingly.

Deputies will be aware that 2020 was far from an ordinary year, as reflected in the higher than usual requests for capital carry-over. The construction industry was not immune to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has resulted in delays to the delivery of some projects.

In addition to the capital allocations committed to in the NDP, a substantial package of supports was granted to Departments to assist employment-intensive economic activity in 2020 in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Government increased the overall 2020 capital expenditure allocations by an additional €1.7 billion, bringing total capital investment in 2020 to almost €9.9 billion. This is the highest ever investment in capital projects and programmes in the history of the State.

A review of the NDP has commenced, with the objective of updating the existing plan in line with commitments outlined in the programme for Government. The review will take on board developments since 2018 such as the impacts of Covid-19 and consider important areas such as climate action, housing, balanced regional development, healthcare, transport, education, and the associated resourcing requirements.

The review is being conducted in close partnership with all Departments and relevant agen-

cies and includes a strong element of stakeholder engagement and public communication.

The public consultation element of the review, entitled Review to Renew, was launched last November and will run until 19 February. It offers everyone in the country the opportunity to have their say, to inform and influence important policy decisions, including the distribution of people, jobs, businesses, houses, roads, public transport, education and health infrastructure, as well as social, cultural and sporting facilities.

I take this opportunity to invite stakeholders such as local authorities, community groups and representative bodies to put forward submissions for consideration on what infrastructure projects should be prioritised in the coming years. The updated NDP will be published this summer and will set out the overall capital allocations to 2030 along with five-year multi-annual departmental allocations.

The 2021 draft order sets out the subheads or programmes under which Departments and agencies propose to spend their capital carry-over amounts specified by Vote in the 2020 Appropriation Act. The total level of carry-over sought from 2020 into 2021 is just under €710 million, which is 7.2% of the total gross voted capital allocation for 2020.

The total gross Exchequer capital allocation for 2021 amounts to almost €10.1 billion. The capital carry-over of €709.7 million will bring the total Exchequer capital available for spending in 2021 to more than €10.8 billion. The main priority areas for spending the capital carry-over of almost €710 million include: €214 million, which is being allocated by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage for key areas of activity, including the urban regeneration and development fund, the water programme, local authority housing, pyrite and mica, energy efficiency and peatlands. A total of €151 million will be spent by the Department of Transport on regional and local roads, public transport, rail projects, regional airports, IT upgrades, carbon reduction, greenways, the Irish Coast Guard and cycling and walking projects.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment will use €106 million of a carry-over for the IDA, Enterprise Ireland, local enterprise development, the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI loan schemes, Microfinance Ireland and subscriptions to the European Space Agency.

The remaining balance of capital carry-over of approximately €170 million will be allocated to 15 further Votes to continue investment in a range of projects. Departments and agencies have delegated responsibility to manage their capital programmes and projects. The availability of these capital carry-over amounts in 2021 will assist them within this framework in tackling economic and social infrastructural priorities in their sectors. I commend the motion to the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I apologise for calling the Minister, the Minister for Finance, at the outset of his contribution.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: This is a technical motion and it relates to capital carry-over from one year to the next. Sinn Féin will be supporting it. This year it represents money included in the 2020 voted allocation that has been unspent. Since the 2004 Act we have a facility to carry over unspent capital expenditure. Section 91 of the Act specified that the provisions would be up to a maximum of 10% of the capital allocation by Vote. This applies only to capital expenditure and not current spending. To allow for spending of the capital carry-over amounts in the following year, the Minister is required to make an order not later than 31 March of that year

determining the capital carry-over amounts by subhead, which will be available for expenditure in those subheads, consistent with the amounts by Vote included in the Appropriation Act.

Dáil approval of the draft ministerial order is required before the Minister can make the order. Once the order is made, the carry-over amounts become a first charge against the subheads considered. This allows for spending of the capital carry-over amounts from the previous year. This process was put in place in the hope of improving departmental budget management and improved flexibility rather than rushing to spend the budget at the year end, Departments can carry unspent money over and look at budgets more in terms of multi-annual envelopes.

When I spoke on the Appropriation Bill in December we thought the underspend was approximately €740 million, but this was only an estimate and today we know that the actual underspend was approximately €710 million. To be precise, the exact capital carry-over for 2021 was €709.9 million. This represents approximately 7.2% of the 2020 allocation that will be carried over. This reduction is accounted for largely due to the Department of Health having a larger spend than was thought in December. The Department did not have a sufficient level of savings at year end and, accordingly, its carry-over has been adjusted on the order to the lower amount of €68 million. The total underspend is striking when compared to 2019 when approximately €200 million was carried over. Covid restrictions have obviously played a major part in that. The furloughing of large sections of the construction industry brought many building sites to a standstill and that has meant that many Departments were not able to progress capital projects in the manner they had envisaged pre-Covid. Delays have arisen not just in construction but also in the areas of planning and procurement. It goes without saying that the amount of carry-over being sought this year is considerably higher than the amount requested in previous years and this is against the backdrop of the impact of Covid-19.

We must ensure the capital expenditure allocation and the amount that is carried over is used to deal with the creaking infrastructure.

2 o'clock

One example of substandard infrastructure that is not fit for purpose and is extremely dangerous for local people is the pier at Inis Oírr. Last Sunday night the passenger boat could not dock at the pier because of heavy swelling and overtopping. The boat attempted to dock again on Monday morning to bring the doctor who serves both Inis Oírr and Inis Meáin to the latter but could not do so. As a result, Inis Meáin was left without a doctor in the middle of a pandemic. I have seen footage of this overtopping, with waves coming over the pier wall onto local residents who were attempting to get the boat. This is extremely dangerous. Those people could have easily been swept into the sea and there could have been fatalities. I will send copies of that video to the Minister so that nobody in Government can claim they did not know anything about it. The weather was bad this week but it has been a lot worse previously.

This development was promised in 2015. I have written to the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands, Deputy Humphreys, about this and have raised it with her previously. I urge the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to work with her on this as a matter of urgency. The Government must communicate with the islanders who have been left in the dark and must ensure that funds are made available for this development before someone is seriously injured or killed. Nobody here can say that they did not know.

Tá contúirt mhór ag baint leis an gcéibh, rud a chonaic muid arís ag an deireadh seachtaine.

Ní raibh an bád farantóireachta in ann dul i dtír oíche Domhnaigh agus arís maidin Dé Luain nuair a rinne sé iarracht eile. Mar gheall air sin, ní raibh an dochtúir in ann dul ó Inis Oírr go hInis Meáin agus ní raibh dochtúir ag muintir Inis Meáin i lár géarchéim sláinte. Bhí éirí mór san fharraige agus bhí an taoide ag dul trasna na céibhe. Chonaic mé físeán dó agus tá mé chun é a sheol chuig an Aire. Bhí beirt ag siúl chuig an mbád agus chuaigh an taoide os cionn balla na céibhe agus thar na daoine sin. Ba éasca go dtitfeadh duine isteach san fharraige mar gheall air sin. Tá sé fíor-chontúirteach. Gealladh céibh nua in 2015 agus táim ag impí ar an Aire anois é seo a phlé lena chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Humphreys, agus a cinntiú go bhfuil an t-airgead ar fáil agus go dtógtar an céibh nua sula ngortófar duine go dona nó níos measa fós, go maraítear duine. The Minister has no excuse. He must speak to his colleague, Deputy Humphreys, and make sure that this development happens.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: As mentioned by my colleague, Deputy Mairéad Farrell, the motion pertains to capital carryover from one year to another and is required before the Minister can make an order for the spending of the carryover. In that regard, the motion and the order itself are essentially technical in nature as the decision on the amount of carryover by Vote has already been determined in the 2020 Appropriations Act, with the carryover allocations by Vote and subhead already set out in the Revised Estimates that were published in December. The motion and the order before us do not involve any new policy decisions or specific funding allocations. The motion is concerned with money included in the 2020 allocations voted by the Dáil that has gone unspent. Rather than going back to the Exchequer, the 2004 Act allows for unspent allocations to be carried forward up to a maximum of 10% of capital allocation by Vote. This was an important and welcome development, ensuring our economy is not starved of investment due to delays in a given calendar year. This is particularly important in the context of Covid-19.

Under the rules, Dáil approval of the draft order is required before any carryover amounts can become a first charge against the subheads concerned, which allows for the spending of capital carryovers. This provides the kind of flexibility that is needed now, more than ever before. The capital underspend was just under €710 million for 2020 with the equivalent capital carryover for 2021. That represents 7.2% of the total capital allocation for 2020. I recognise that the primary reason for this level of underspending is Covid-19 and the associated restrictions. The underspend is both understandable and unavoidable. However, we have suffered from an infrastructure deficit as a result of years of underinvestment by successive Fine Gael Governments which really underscores the need for sustained levels of capital investment in the years ahead in major transport, housing and health infrastructure as well as local projects.

On 22 January the Central Bank in its quarterly bulletin estimated that unemployment will not return to pre-pandemic levels until after 2022. We all know that capital expenditure is a key driver and lever in supporting employment and it will be absolutely crucial in the years ahead. Capital investment by the Government can ensure jobs are supported State-wide, including in Donegal and other regions that have been forgotten. These are regions which the figures show clearly have the highest levels of deprivation and unemployment and the lowest levels of disposable income. We need policy development that is based on facts and figures and data shows that Donegal is one of the hardest hit counties in terms of job losses as a result of Covid-19. The Minister and the Government cannot allow some bureaucratic blockages to delay projects that would provide jobs for Donegal. Many such projects have been proposed by myself, my colleague Deputy MacLochlainn and other Members from the area.

As the motion relates to the Appropriations Bill I will again raise a project in Donegal that

I have raised on numerous occasions with the Minister, most recently last December when the aforementioned Bill was before the Dáil. I refer to the new Finn Harps stadium. Tá an tionscnamh seo geallta agus tá muintir Bhealach Féich agus Srath an Urláir ag fanacht agus ag fanacht leis. Tá an coiste áitiúil, na himreoirí agus an lucht tacaíochta fágtha ag fanacht. Leis an toil cheart pholaitiúil tá an deis ann an rud ceart a dhéanamh. Seo tionscnamh atá ina shuí ansin, réidh le dul chun cinn. Dá dtabharfaí an cead dó, bheadh poist á gcruthú sa cheantar agus bheadh dul chun cinn i dteannta chúrsaí spóirt sa chontae. Seo an t-am anois le solas glas a thabhairt don tionscnamh seo. As I said before, the Finn Harps stadium is a shining example of how we can get shovel-ready projects moving. It is a project that can create employment in one of the counties worst hit by unemployment as a result of Covid-19, a county that was already starved of employment before the pandemic. It is a shovel-ready project that would create jobs locally and enrich the sporting community in Donegal. A total of €1.2 million was spent by the State on this project over a decade ago but it has been left sitting idle, with work stalled since 2014. The project has planning permission and is ready to go ahead. Commitments were made by the Department previously and now it is time to deliver. As I said, this is a shovel-ready project that would support jobs and serve the local community. I urge the Minister to ensure that funding is provided to move the Finn Harps stadium project forward in 2021.

There are many other projects in need of funding and I note that the Minister said that walking projects will be part of this new capital allocation. In that context, I draw his attention to the main street in Glenties. As I pointed out previously to the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, people are regularly tripping and falling and are, unfortunately, taking cases against the local authority. There are many other projects that could be funded with this money.

Deputy Ged Nash: As we know, this is a technical matter in many senses. Indeed, a similar motion last March attracted no debate or real attention at all. However, the sheer scale of the carryover and the magnitude of State spending last year and this year warrants debate and further examination.

There are now 607,000 people, or 25% of the labour force, out of work, all of whom have their own stories, circumstances and struggles. Hundreds of thousand more are having their wages paid through State subsidies. They are all looking for some sense of hope, some sense that even in this dark time they can look forward to a future where jobs, businesses and prospects are secure. They long for a signal of a brighter, fairer future.

The sense that increased spending by the State will drive better value and more equal outcomes is often missing from the dry, detached analyses we are treated to here. The long-promised national economic recovery plan has been postponed twice already and many of the much vaunted initiatives like the stay and spend scheme have plainly flopped. Do not get me wrong - the additional investment is essential. Services, supports and inputs into those are both welcome and necessary but now the debate must shift to how we use the resources we have to set out our vision for a better Ireland. We know that strategic capital investment in areas such as housing, healthcare, childcare, climate and transport will not only provide jobs and sustainable growth but will also drastically improve our quality of life by finally building the type of public services in this country that have been the basic norm for decades across Europe. We were already playing catch up, with the lowest level of Government expenditure in the EU and OECD and this crisis must be a catalyst for lasting change.

In recent weeks the IMF advised governments across the world to spend “as much as you can and then spend a little bit more”, citing evidence which suggests that investment in green

infrastructure in particular provides two thirds more in terms of growth, which is exceptional value. We must ensure that we spend in the right areas so that we get the biggest bang for our buck, economically and socially. Effective oversight of, and accountability for, this historic expenditure is, therefore, needed yet it has been sorely lacking so far. The Minister knows and acknowledges that fact and that the situation is, and has been, imperfect. We have already seen a de facto suspension of many of the robust budgetary oversight practices we had come to expect and demand over recent years in respect of the presentation of Government spending plans. The scale of this carry-over causes yet more problems of transparency and accountability, as noted by the Parliamentary Budget Office from time to time.

Despite this, not only is this Government failing to spend transparently or wisely, but the carry-over figures show that it is also failing to spend fully in critical Departments despite the problem of creaking public infrastructure and a raft of shovel-ready projects across the country which have not yet been started. Although the historically high capital carry-over of some €700 million is, to a degree, to be expected due to Covid-19, what is more worrying is the high capital underspends under the headings of housing, transport and climate. We all understand the circumstances. For example, building sites have not been operating at full tilt. That is entirely understandable but it does not tell the entire story. By my reckoning, we will not be anywhere near our targets in respect of social housing, new builds or home retrofitting and that is worrying. Even more worrying is that this Government, which is led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and which includes the Green Party, which might be said to have lost its colour, is incapable of imagining the role of a bigger state, a state that could provide a new social contract for its citizens while putting hundreds of thousands of people back to work securely.

To refer to housing again, we all know the demand for the building of affordable homes. Through the local authorities, the State must play the lead role. Despite this, we have seen the Minister's Government propose a €75 million scheme for so-called affordable housing which officials of the Minister's own Department have said "will push up prices [...] at a time when prices are starting to rise anyway." This represents another gift to developers and proves yet again that this Government will continue to rely on a failed private sector model rather than driving State-led capital investment. The Government cannot make the same mistakes again. The social price will be paid if we go down that road.

I look forward to hearing more details regarding the forthcoming national economic plan from the Minister and about how he plans to address the issues I have raised today and repeatedly over recent months with regard to the enhancement of transparency and accountability in respect of expenditure and the management of the public finances.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the motion the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, has introduced this afternoon. It is technical, as others have said, but it is also vitally important. We all know that, at the heart of it, this is not a contentious motion. It is necessary. It gives us an opportunity to raise particular issues but I expect, and hope to see, the support of the entire House for this sensible measure.

I will pick up on a few of the comments Deputy Nash made. This motion shows the true impact of Covid-19 on the infrastructural ambition of the State. It is only wise of me to ask some questions of the Minister. He might not necessarily answer them during this debate but perhaps he will take them back to the Department where they might factor into wider considerations on Government policy. Housing is rightly seen as central and necessary. I refer to the development of State-built housing and social, affordable and private housing. It is necessary that the

likes of the Land Development Agency truly realise their potential and fulfil their mandates. We have seen the necessary slowdown of many sectors, particularly the construction sector, due to the pandemic. The vast majority of sites, whether small, medium or large, are closed. We are already one month into another year and the impacts of the pandemic are still painfully felt, first and foremost by the victims of this terrible virus and their families, but also by the economy and the entire operation and development of the State. There is one month down with another 11 to go but, with the best will in the world, we know there will be some element of restriction for a large part of this year, if not for all of it. The Minister might be able to come back to me in writing or through informal engagement in due course on the measures that can be taken to fast-track these vitally important infrastructural projects, particularly the very necessary provision of social housing, when we get the green light.

A number of sites are still open and construction is proceeding with the necessary precautions but they represent an extremely small part of the sector. We all know the need to construct not only homes, although they are the foremost concern, but also developments in the commercial and State sectors. We are now, in 2021, talking about a capital carry-over. I wonder if we will be having the same conversation in 2022. If we need to do so, so be it, but how can we plan for a system under which we can make up for lost time when it is possible to do things properly and within health guidelines?

I will also refer to a couple of other areas. I hope the entire House would agree that housing is the first and foremost priority, as is the development of our health service, but I will also address some niche matters, although I will not go into any constituency concerns as such. I will refer to the overall economic response to Brexit, the pinch of which we are starting to feel, and necessary infrastructural developments. I am thinking about roads to the major ports, including Dublin Port, Rosslare Europort and the Port of Cork. We were all pleased to see the announcement made by Brittany Ferries of an increase in the number of direct sailings to France from the Port of Cork. This is very important because the Continent is our largest market and has the potential to be our largest growth market in the coming decade. It is very important that we realise every opportunity in this regard and put every necessary element in place to do so. I refer to the infrastructural work which has not been able to progress, for example, the M11-N11 upgrade or, more pertinently, the really important development of Rosslare Europort. Perhaps the Minister, after discussion with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, may be able to get back to me with his opinion on the latter project. Dublin Port has expanded massively over the last year or two. Rosslare Europort is also expanding but the traffic leaving the port has now increased by 500%. This traffic is going directly to the Continent, to the ports that are vital in servicing our largest market. There is, however, concern over the port's ownership. It is jointly owned through the Fishguard and Rosslare Railways and Harbours Company. The Minister and his colleague, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, need to resolve this matter because if we are to realise opportunities in the Single Market and on the Continent, we will do so through the development, expansion and modernisation of Rosslare Europort and the Port of Cork. That is vital. Dublin Port is big and moving well but we have to look at those two alternatives. This will require the continuation of capital spending on the arteries into, and the areas servicing, these ports into 2022 and beyond.

The last area to which I will refer before giving way relates to the €106 million funding to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, as mentioned by the Minister in his speech. The vast majority of the focus provided by IDA Ireland and Microfinance Ireland is on Brexit preparedness. Even though Brexit has nominally happened, we cannot stop prepar-

ing. We are starting to see its fallout on companies, individuals and citizens across this island every day. I will return to my hobby horse of maximising the potential of the Single Market and the Common Market. Infrastructural and capital spending is required in our State agencies to ensure this potential is realised and to ensure IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland are able to exploit every single opportunity. This may involve Irish producers and goods replacing British producers and goods on the Continent. That cannot happen without the support of the State and without proper investment in the measures that will, in co-ordination with European funding, allow Irish businesses to realise those opportunities.

I commend the motion to the House. It is very timely that we have this opportunity to raise some key points about spending. It would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity, in the remaining two and half minutes, to mention once again an issue I have brought up with the Minister by way of parliamentary question, Topical Issue debate and written letter. I refer to the use of cash related to criminal activity seized by An Garda Síochána. Last year, €16 million in cash was seized, which was an increase on €7 million in the previous two years. We are only one month into this year and already more than €2 million in cash has been seized. That cash needs to be ring-fenced for capital and current spending aimed at addressing the causes of the criminality by which it was raised. It is about getting into communities, constructing physical resources and structures, such as schools and education centres, and providing early intervention and outreach programmes. I urge the Minister to look again at this matter when he and his fellow Minister, Deputy Donohoe, start the budget projections and calculations for next year - I know it is early to talk of that now - in order to use the €16 million that came into the Exchequer last year and to ring-fence it for investment in addressing the causes of crime at source.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: This order, as the Minister will know, is not the most exciting matter we will speak about during this term but it is nonetheless quite an important piece of housekeeping that we, as a Parliament, need to complete. It is a technical motion to ensure that unspent capital is carried over from 2020 to 2021. The amount of money we are discussing are not insignificant, however, standing at more than €709 million. It is important, therefore, that we give this the level of consideration that it deserves.

The pandemic and associated restrictions have put a pause on some capital projects. There are several, however, that I would like to refer to briefly. These are projects in my home constituency that need to be completed as a matter of urgency. The Minister will have heard me raising some of these over the past number of years and I wish to raise them again today and state that capital programmes need to be done.

There is a road in my constituency called the Coonagh to Knockalisheen road and the Minister is probably tired of me talking about this. This is a critical piece of infrastructure in the regeneration programme for the city of Limerick, not just for the north side of the city but for the whole city, particularly the Moyross area and the area around Caherdavin and south-east Clare. At my request and that of other Deputies, I understand that the Taoiseach met with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, last week to talk about this road. Unfortunately, on Monday on local radio a Green Party Deputy spoke about how the Government was looking to deliver two thirds of this road.

That is actually bonkers. The only way to describe this is as a crackpot decision. An Bord Pleanála suggested that the plan being discussed by the Green Party would not be feasible, would not get planning permission and would end up with Moyross becoming not just the cul-de-sac that it is now, but a rat-run which would increase traffic. I am pleading that the Coonagh

to Knockalisheen road is put back on the agenda. It is partially built and €70 million has been poured into it already. The contract is there ready and is sitting on the desk of the Minister, Deputy Ryan, who is in ideological opposition to signing this contract tender. The company which has been awarded the tender is ready to start in the morning. I appeal to the Minister to speak to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, who should not delay this. The communities are frustrated and outraged. This critical piece of infrastructure needs to be delivered as this is not just a simple road.#

The other issue I raise is University Hospital Limerick. We have a consistent problem there with overcrowding. It is the most overcrowded hospital in the State. There is a plan there to develop a 96-bed unit. I would very much appreciate it if the Minister could keep this project on the radar and that it is expedited as fast as possible. Unfortunately, the last three days have seen an average of 50 people a day on trolleys, which is the highest in the State by a country mile. In January of this year we had 949 people lingering on trolleys in University Hospital Limerick, which is totally outrageous and needs to be looked at. We opened a 60-bed modular unit there recently and, unfortunately, it did not have the impact that we had anticipated. There is a plan for a 96-bed unit that needs to be expedited as fast as possible.

The third issue I wish to raise is the flood defences. This week marks the seventh anniversary of the devastating flood where Limerick City was very badly affected, particularly the King's Island and St Mary's Park areas. Seven years later we do not have the flood defences built or put in place and very little has been done. I urge that this capital project and that those flood defences be progressed and put in as quickly as possible. This is an older community where people are very stressed and get very worried when the tide is higher and the rain is like we have seen in the last number of days.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am happy to have the opportunity to speak in this short debate on this technical order on the carry-over of capital expenditure. The Social Democrats are happy to acknowledge that they do not, in principle, have an issue with this and will comply with the requirement of a Dáil approval for that order. There is no doubt that the figure we are carrying over is very substantial at close to €710 million. It will be added to the expected capital expenditure for next year, bringing the total capital expenditure to €10.8 billion. This is a massive sum.

I am not going to stand here today calling for particular projects in my own constituency to be funded because that is not the approach that should be taken, even though we will hear those pleas from many Members. That is one of the fundamental problems associated with how we spend money in this country. This is not the money of any party or of the Government, it is the people's money. There should be an assurance from the Government that that money will be spent wisely and fairly. Unfortunately, we have not seen that in the past. Big decisions about big capital and other expenditures are very much related to what are regarded as political priorities. It is more about holding seats than doing what is right by the people. There is a very strong public demand to get away from that nonsense and to stop this idea that if one does not have a Minister in Cabinet then one's constituency is going to lose out. That has probably been the case since time began in this country but it is wrong and should not be the case. It has also resulted in a great deal of money being wasted and spent in areas where it was not needed. The corollary of that is that there are many areas which have been completely starved of funding. That kind of approach is just not good enough and is not one that is taken, for example, in other countries. I have looked at this in some detail in respect of health expenditure but this applies right across the board. It should not be a matter of who shouts the loudest, who has the

most well-resourced lobby group or who has the most clout in Cabinet. That is a very outdated and unfair way of approaching the whole issue of spending. We should move to a much more transparent and progressive way of taking decisions on public expenditure. It should be on the basis of an objective resource allocation. This is standard practice across the rest of Europe. When it comes to spending in whatever area it is, one builds a resource allocation model that is objective. One looks at and profiles the different parts of the country in terms of socioeconomic status, from an age perspective, from a rural perspective or from an intense urban deprivation perspective. All of those types of factors play into the status of any particular area.

That is what we should be doing. We have the data to do that in small areas. The late Trutz Haase did exceptional work in this area which fed into some of the model that we built into the Department of Health back in 2011-2012. That work needs to be built on. Let us do away with this pork barrel type of politics, about who can shout the loudest or who has political clout and develop a way spending money in this country, which is the people's money, in a way that is fair and achieves the objectives that we have set out for the country in developing into a modern, progressive and fair country that actually works. That is why we have services that just do not function. People ask why on earth we cannot have decent public transport, why housing is so expensive or why we cannot have access to proper healthcare. All of these things are taken for granted in other modern, progressive countries but do not happen here. My fundamental message to the Minister is to take an objective and transparent approach to the spending of money and set criteria by which he can gauge the wisdom of those decisions.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am very pleased to speak on this motion. The year 2020 was an exceptional one and we have not been able to achieve the capital expenditure that we wanted to. It is sensible to roll it over in this way. What Covid-19 has done to the management of our economy and to the management of our public finances is to provide an extraordinary counter cyclical opportunity. This is situated against a completely different approach from the European Central Bank and a different approach generally in how we think about economies, stimulus programmes and in how we plan and imagine our economies and societies for the future. There are, of course, no advantages to Covid-19. We have had an opportunity to reflect on how we live our lives and to think about how we want to continue to live them in future. I refer to where we want to live our lives, how we want to get to and from work and how we are going to plan for those aspects over the next ten years. I am not sure we would have ever had this opportunity in other circumstances, or it might have taken an extremely long time.

The national development plan, NDP, and the national planning framework on which it is based, was conceived in earlier times and before we had this opportunity to reflect. The effort at that earlier time, with which I was privileged to be involved, was intended to try to dampen development in Dublin and push it out to the other cities to achieve a better regional balance across the island. The primary driver of that process was the climate agenda in respect of trying to ensure we were not overdeveloping a single location. The aim was to provide real communities, where it would be possible for people to do all that they wanted to do in cities on the rest of this island, and not just in Dublin. Included in that aim were activities such as going to a cinema or to the theatre, to work in the high technology area or anything that people may have wanted to do around the different parts of the island. It was a process, however, driven by an urge for compact urban development, so that people would not have been commuting long distances to and from work.

That idea concerning commuting to work, and over long distances to work, has now been turned on its head. We must now think differently about work and commercial space and the

repurposing of those spaces in the years to come. We have a major opportunity to reconceive our cities. There is a great opportunity to reimagine how Dublin has been used, the scale of commercial space and whether, and how, it may be possible to convert some of that space into residential space. I refer to reinvigorating our city and town centres and making them vibrant places where people can really live. Such a process could, in its own way, help to suppress the demand for more and more housing out in the hinterland of the city. That demand still exists, notwithstanding the national planning framework and its placement on a statutory footing.

This is a creative opportunity which we may not get again because we may not have the political, social and cultural space to do it. In the repurposing of this money, and in planning for the next two budgetary cycles, I urge the Minister to really think about whether a team might be put together to imagine creative changes which need to be made to the national planning framework, about which a national consultation is ongoing. Thought must also be given to how that undertaking is going to be driven from within the Civil Service and how that process of reimagining can be driven for the benefit of our people in the years to come.

On this specific spending, I agree with the previous speakers regarding not mentioning constituency projects. It is difficult as a Teachta to reconcile the challenge posed by being, on one hand, a national legislator here to speak on the planning of the national finances as much as anything else, while, on the other hand, addressing the needs of constituents concerning schools and other similar things. Instead of mentioning different schools or other issues, therefore, I suggest that it is not sustainable for us to reach the point where Teachtaí must beg for the redevelopment of schools. We cannot get to a point where schools are based in prefabricated buildings for years, without any certainty about what will happen the following year. That is an unsustainable financial and political model which favours clientelism and local lobbying. It is not a sensible and grown-up way to plan. The need for school developments is already visible. The schools themselves are well able to articulate those needs, and they have done so.

Projections of our growing population allow us to know where people are living and where the resulting demand is. We can see from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, data where more schools are going to be needed. We cannot have a situation where schools are begging for money and begging the Department of Education for redevelopment and for an architect to visit. It is an unsustainable way of planning, and I urge the Minister to use his offices and his Department to require that a different model be adopted in the Department of Education. I refer to a model which is better planned, frankly, than the current model and which would not require me and other Deputies to come in and beg for money for different schools in different places.

This is the final opportunity that can be availed of in respect of this money, and other moneys, in the broader context of what I said about the existing opportunity to operate counter-cyclically, in the area of addressing our overwhelming climate agenda and the associated projects which are essential to allow us to continue to survive. An example is the substantial water treatment upgrades necessary in different parts of the country, particularly in my constituency. These are massive capital projects requiring urgent investment. There will be financial implications for the State in respect of environmental fines if we cannot resolve these problems, which would just be wrong. While we have this counter-cyclical opportunity, and it will not come along all that often, we must invest in the manner that I have outlined.

We must also think about how we can use our existing space in respect of horticulture and waste management to try to drive ahead with the development of horticulture, food provision and food security for this island. Several opportunities are evident when we look around our

cities for developments in vertical farming, for example, and for taking steps that have not been available or desirable thus far. This is a unique opportunity to reimagine Dublin city centre and city centres generally. The revision of the national development plan, on foot of the national planning framework, if that itself needs changes, is a substantial opportunity, and I urge the Minister to use the best resources available in respect of imagination and creativity to try to drive this endeavour.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I welcome this opportunity to speak on this motion. In other years, attempts were made to dispose of this matter without debate and I am pleased the Government has not tried to go down that road this time around. I also accept that there will be occasions when money will remain unspent. However, some of the areas where spending has not occurred are inexcusable. I have many concerns about the 2021 Revised Estimates for the public services.

I am concerned that we underspent in our current and capital spending on housing last year. We are also planning a €721 million reduction in the Estimates in current spending on housing this year, which is a 23% reduction. We are in the middle of a housing crisis and we should be increasing our spending in this area, and not reducing it. I note that there is an increase in capital spending, but it is nowhere near enough. Only small, single digit, increases are proposed for our defence capital and current spending. We must pay the personnel of our Defence Forces more and ensure that they have up-to-date equipment. The members of the Defence Forces have stood up to the plate during the pandemic and it is time to start reversing the years of underfunding and neglect.

There is also a pittance of an increase in current spending of 1.2% for An Garda Síochána, which comes at a time when there have been two attacks on elderly people in their homes in south Kildare in as many weeks. Garda visibility is at an all-time low. I do not blame the Garda for this situation, because the force can only work with what we give it. We can and must do more. Remaining in the justice area, there is a 10% reduction in capital spending in respect of An Garda Síochána, a 24% decrease in spending on the Courts Service and a 21% decrease in spending on the Prison Service. What kind of message is this sending to criminals? It is an absolute disgrace.

There is a 9%, or €34 million, reduction in spending in the area of rural and community development. We must repurpose many empty buildings in our towns and villages to provide employment opportunities, as well as homes, and give people a reason to stay in rural Ireland. It seems as if this Government could not care less if the last person leaving rural Ireland switched off the lights. The Government forgets that the country does not end at the ball in Naas.

While I welcome the increased spending in the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, we must ensure that there is a just transition. It cannot all just be about carbon taxes, which affect our older people disproportionately. Microgeneration must be at the heart of our policy. Subsidising foreign-owned wind farms is not working. We must fast-track the ability in respect of microgeneration for retail customers. They must also be able to sell power back to the national grid and we must make it more economical for them to invest in renewable energy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This is a technical motion on one level, but it is, nonetheless, an opportunity to highlight some important issues. We are talking about underspending of €709 million in many areas of capital spending, which is an indication of how significant the

impact of Covid-19 has been. We must also add to that figure the roughly €20 billion in additional spending which is also related to the pandemic.

To be honest, this exposes the Government's false narrative concerning its strategy balancing public health with the economy. The truth is that the living with Covid-19 strategy has been a disaster from a public health perspective, which we can see when we look at the number of tragic fatalities. It has also been a disaster economically because we are caught in a cycle of surge and then lockdown, and the Government has no strategy to get out of that cycle. It is not pursuing the strategy that has been pursued in Australia, New Zealand, Vietnam and in many other places where most of the time most of the people are living normally, and where the economic damage is far less. I wanted to underline that.

The area of music, arts and events has been most devastated by this. I have spoken about it many times but it has to be highlighted again. The people in this group have been locked down for the full 357 days of this pandemic. Their livelihoods, like their industry, are absolutely devastated. When we talk about capital investment, it is very important to stress that the greatest capital we have is people. They are the most important capital we have. Nowhere is that more true than in the area of arts, music and cultural events. The people who work in those areas are the capital. To be honest, the Government has abandoned that capital. The creative and imaginative human talent that is at the cornerstone of what this country is and its culture, and the things that have made our lives bearable through this grim and terrible pandemic, have effectively been abandoned.

I will give the House some figures around the musicians. These are possibly new figures from a survey by the Music and Entertainment Association of Ireland, which show that 41% of those surveyed, who are musicians and people in the events and music industry, have had 100% income loss; 24% have had 90% to 99% income loss; 20% have been forced into other employment, which is human capital leaving music; 56% feel they will have to take up other employment and effectively leave; 22% have had to sell the equipment essential to their work; 26% are struggling to pay their mortgage; 31% are struggling to pay loans; 45% struggle to pay their bills; 17% are on the verge of losing their vehicles; 25% receive support from services for mental health problems; and 45% are concerned about their mental health. This is the damage being done to our musicians, our events workers and our artists who have been completely locked down. Many of the grant support schemes such as the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, and the grant announced in the past couple of days continue to exclude the vast majority of these musicians, arts workers and so on. I could add in taxi drivers because they do not happen to have a premises or fit the other criteria for such schemes, but we will talk about them on another day.

There is a €709 million underspend, which is a lot of money because the €10.1 billion will be now €10.8 billion in 2021, as the Taoiseach has said. I am sure that most of it at least goes to important projects but it is interesting that some industries have recorded super profits. Some of them have been getting supports during the pandemic and have been doing well out of the pandemic. The huge numbers of musicians, arts and events workers, however, are devastated and their mental health is on the floor. They are selling the equipment and the vehicles they need to ply their trade, and yet they are excluded from the Covid support schemes. I ask the Minister, that given we have all of this money underspent, to consider a bespoke scheme to support those music, arts and cultural workers who are on their knees and who have been locked down for the entirety of this pandemic so we still have a culture and a music industry when this is over.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister for the opportunity to raise a number of issues in this debate. An underspend of €709 million is a substantial sum of money. It also raises the issue of how we assess projects and why it takes so long for them to be assessed and approved. I especially want to address the projects identified by the Office of Public Works, OPW. It appears to be quite a slow process in the context of dealing with projects coming through. How can we fast-track some of those projects?

I welcome the Minister's approval of funding for the Glashaboy flood relief scheme some weeks ago, but the need for that scheme was identified more than eight years ago. It was only recently approved. More than €2 million has been spent on that project in environmental impact studies, which must be done. However, €2 million spent without a sod yet turned raises very serious questions about the process. The Blackpool flood relief scheme is awaiting approval and I hope it will be approved very soon. Again, however, it is a case of waiting eight or ten years for approval. There must be a faster way of dealing with these projects, assessing them to determine whether funding should be made available and ensuring it is made available in timely manner. These are important projects. These are just two projects, but there are projects right around the country where the OPW requires new infrastructure to be put in place.

I will also raise the issue of elective hospitals. Ireland has a serious shortage of hospital beds and we need to tackle this. Covid-19 has emphasised more than ever the need to deal urgently with the issue. We have identified the need, and a clear plan is set out, to build three new elective hospitals around the country and yet we seem to have made very little progress on simple things such as identifying sites and even on consultation. A recent report in the *Irish Examiner* from a group identified a site for the new elective hospital for Cork. There has been very little consultation, however, with the current voluntary or private hospitals in Cork, including the Mercy University Hospital and the South Infirmity Victoria University Hospital. There must be consultation but these three building projects must now be prioritised. They should not be delayed further. The consultation has gone on for the past three years and now we need to prioritise it. It should not be another three years before we even start to apply for planning permission. Even if we decided the sites in the morning it would still take 12 months to come up with designs and a plan, and 12 to 18 months to come forward with full planning permissions. Then it would take another three to four years before we would have them built. We are talking about five years down the road before any of these projects will be delivered. I ask the Minister that these three projects would now be given priority because we need them.

We also need to address the whole issue of elderly care. The Joint Committee on Health yesterday had a report from the Department of Health and the HSE showing that 81% of people who are in nursing homes are in private nursing homes. We have community hospitals and HSE nursing homes, but many of these require major refurbishment. Can we fast-track those projects? The population over the age of 65 is currently 720,000 but by 2030 it will be 1 million. There will be an increase in demand for nursing home care, as well as trying to roll out additional home care support.

We need to look at how we progress the building of schools. I recently had to deal with some issues in the context of a school building project. I ended up dealing with six different authorities, including the OPW, the Department of Education, the county council and the ESB. I could not get a straight answer because it appears there was no one person co-ordinating the project in real terms, even though the boards of management in the schools were working very hard to get the boxes ticked and the decisions made. In projects such as that, there must be somebody who is able to co-ordinate all the State agencies so there is no undue delay. We are

discussing €709 million that has not been spent. Part of the reason for that is the lack of co-ordination between different State agencies, local authorities and other people involved. It is something we must examine.

I wish to return to the health sector, particularly mental health facilities. I recently spoke to somebody who is working in a mental health facility in which nine of the 27 people in the facility died. The facility had six residents per room. When Covid-19 arrived it was not possible for the facility to control it. A number of mental health facilities have not received adequate funding over the last number of years. They have to be refurbished and upgraded to ensure they can provide the proper standard of care that people deserve. These are some of the issues we must focus on and ensure that with any project that is identified, be it in Cork, Dublin, Galway or Donegal, there is not the delay that appears to be occurring in many projects. These projects have been identified and deemed urgent yet, two years later, we find there is very little progress made. We must review that. Due to the various issues that Covid has revealed, the prioritisation of healthcare facilities more than any other facilities is necessary to ensure we can deliver a healthcare service and that we have the facilities in which to do so.

Those are my thoughts on this issue. It is important to look at the mistakes that have been made in the last number of years and to plan for the future. We must also plan to ensure we can deliver in a timely manner. I acknowledge the Minister's work and the work of all departmental officials. They work extremely hard within the rules, but sometimes we need to change the rules in order to deliver on time and within budget.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: This is a technical measure, but it provides an opportunity to speak about necessary capital projects. I wish to add my voice to those of other speakers who spoke about difficulties with the audit system, the planning system and with moving major capital projects forward, be they schools, hospitals, certain housing developments and the like.

Representatives of Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and the National Transport Authority, NTA, attended the transport committee meeting yesterday and they spoke about the difficulties they have with the planning process. We are all aware that from time to time local residents are not necessarily happy with situations. Sometimes there are projects in planning for years, but they may lie dormant and the conditions change. This can be brought to the attention of TII or some other agency. The difficulty is that the agency accepts that there are demographic changes, geographical changes and certain things that must be taken into account, but it has to re-enter an entire new process as regards planning, so the projects are put back. The Ardee bypass is one such project. This must be circumvented. It is a matter of a process that works for the project leader, whether it is TII or the local authority, and for residents, whereby one can get into pre-consultation and get the problems dealt with as quickly as possible.

We need to get to a greater level of audits and pre-planning. We all know the difficulties relating to the housing crisis, but within that there are areas such as Blackrock and Haggardstown in my constituency where a number of housing developments have been built. There has been a serious increase in population, especially of the young population. That impacts on the need for schools, be they primary or secondary. We need a better system to address this across the board.

It would be remiss of me not to deal with the fact that Louth County Council has two major requests in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage at present for urban renewal development funding. The port access route in Drogheda is absolutely vital for the future of Drogheda and impacts on every issue ranging from housing to everything else. I would

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not be allowed to speak in the House again if I did not mention that, as it is constantly being championed by Deputy Munster and Councillor Joanna Byrne. I must also refer to the fact that the county council has an application in respect of Linenhall Street and Bridge Street to finish the work that is necessary to improve the centre of Dundalk. There is a wider body of work that must be done with regard to urban planning into the future, given the changing nature of urban centres.

We have to grasp this opportunity. I am aware of many of the national development plan submissions and the national development plan is being dealt with by the Minister. We must examine how we can put a better system in place as regards planning.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, more than one person died every week in Ireland as a result of asthma. One in five children and one in ten adults in Ireland have asthma. One in 14 people in Ireland have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, COPD. There is no doubt that these people are more likely to be hospitalised or to die as a result of Covid-19. Energy poverty has an adverse effect on health and cold, damp housing exacerbates these respiratory problems. I believe energy efficiency is the primary tool in tackling energy poverty. One in four people in Ireland today cannot afford to heat and light their homes. There is a moral imperative to ensure that everyone can afford to pay for their lighting and heating.

Budget 2017, which was my first budget as a Minister, saw a significant increase in investment in energy efficiency. That was expanded again in budget 2018, in which we looked at far deeper energy-efficiency upgrades. I was lucky to be able to secure, as part of Project Ireland 2040, a €4 billion budget for carrying out deep retrofits and energy efficiency to take dirty fossil fuels out of our heating systems, including in all homes, by 2035. The climate action plan brought that target back to 2033. However, as I said when Project Ireland 2040 was launched, it was not about the commitment and the targets, but about delivering on the targets, which would be the key challenge. One of the main measures relating to energy efficiency and particularly fuel poverty is the warmer homes scheme. Historically, that was focused on smaller, shallower measures to improve the energy efficiency of homes, but, as Minister, I provided the funding to carry out deep retrofits of homes across the country and dramatically expanded the investment in that in 2018. As a result, 5,255 homes had a retrofit carried out in 2018. These homes are occupied by people who are on social welfare and do not have the resources to carry out the type of retrofit that is needed for many homes and the older housing stock across the country.

In 2019, however, the number of homes retrofitted fell by 40% compared to what was achieved in 2018. Last year, 2020, it collapsed with a 70% reduction in the number of homes retrofitted compared to 2018. Today, there are approximately 7,000 families who are reliant on social welfare waiting for approval to have their homes retrofitted under that scheme.

3 o'clock

Disappointingly, last week the current Minister responsible for energy, Deputy Eamon Ryan, said there were changes coming to the scheme “to better target those most in need”. In other words, quite a number of those 7,000 people who are in energy poverty and who are reliant on social welfare will now be excluded from his revision of that scheme. That is wrong.

The Minister also announced a new national retrofit programme for 2021 but we have no information on that as of yet. We are already into February. If we were trying to maximise the number of retrofits due to take place and the capital drawdown in 2021, then that scheme should

have been operational in January of this year. This was committed to in the programme for Government. There has been ample time to design this retrofit scheme and it has not happened. The argument will be made that we cannot retrofit homes because of the lockdown. I accept that people cannot go into homes at the moment with the current restrictions, but much of the work that is required is external. That could be prioritised at this time and be carried out. It is not just about energy poverty. Regarding the Government's own objectives relating to climate emissions, energy efficiency is the first and most significant step on the road to reducing overall emissions and improving air quality throughout this country.

As a result of the pandemic, families' heating bills have gone up dramatically and that has been compounded by increased carbon taxes and the subsidising of data centres. It is immoral that people who are struggling to pay electricity bills are subsidising the electricity going into data centres, many of which have been constructed on a speculative proposition. There was a 9% increase in residential carbon emissions during the 2020 lockdown and we have seen a fall-off in the retrofitting of homes, which commenced in 2019 and collapsed in 2020. We need a step change in retrofitting homes and that needs to be prioritised as part of the capital plan.

An Ceann Comhairle: As there are no other contributors from the Government, the Rural Independent Group or the Independent Group present, I call the Minister again.

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I thank all the Deputies for contributing to the debate on this motion. In substance, it is a technical motion providing for the carrying forward of more than €700 million of the capital budget from 2020 into 2021, in order that those funds will be available for expenditure across a range of areas under the public capital investment programme. It will not be possible for me to respond to all the individual local projects that were mentioned during the debate but I am sure colleagues across the House will be engaging with the line Departments and with the sponsoring bodies in respect of all those individual projects.

The €710 million that is being provided in 2021, in addition to the budget already provided, will bring the overall capital expenditure allocation for 2021 to around €10.8 billion, which is a new record high in the history of the State. To allay some of the concerns that were raised, the actual expenditure in 2020, notwithstanding the significant impact of Covid-19, substantially exceeded the original budget. The original budget in 2020 was around €8.2 billion in capital terms and the actual spend across the public capital programme in 2020 exceeded €9 billion. It is important to put that on the record.

As colleagues know, we are undertaking the review of the national development plan, NDP, with a view to ensuring that it is consistent with Project Ireland 2040. Sitting alongside the national planning framework, the NDP is a vital document setting out a roadmap for the development of our country over the next decade and beyond. There will be a requirement to reconsider the priorities in the NDP in the context of developments that have taken place, including the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the changes that have been forced upon us are here to stay to a greater or lesser extent. There is a renewed commitment to tackling the climate emergency and that will feature strongly in the review of the NDP, in addition to investment in transport, housing policy, implementation of Sláintecare, and balanced regional development to ensure that happens in a meaningful and tangible way.

In addition to all the traditional forms of capital that we always associate with the public capital programme, such as the building of schools and roads and the improvement of public

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transport infrastructure, capital expenditure also relates to digitalisation, investing in e-health and ensuring we have modern systems across our public services. It can also provide funding for grants through IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, for example. Over the course of 2020, restart grants in the order of €700 million were provided to businesses. The traditional concept of capital expenditure has evolved and changed over that period. Of course, investment in broadband is also a key area and a very important plank of the Government's capital investment programme.

As part of the NDP review we need to improve delivery, and this aligns with the comments of a number of Deputies. It is a priority for me as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to improve the capacity of the system to deliver. As part of phase 1 of the review of the NDP, there is a lot of technical work under way evaluating the capacity of the public sector to deliver on major public capital projects. We are also looking at alternative financing methods, such as public private partnerships, for example. We are looking at investment trends and the return the State gets from its public capital programme. We will be moving on to phase 2 in the next few months and will eventually agree a new ten-year NDP, which will be exciting and ambitious and will align with the priorities of this Government and broadly with those of this House and the country as well. I again thank all Deputies for their contributions and support for this motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Reappointment of the Ombudsman for Children: Motion

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I move:

That Dáil Éireann recommends Dr. Niall Muldoon for re-appointment by the President to be the Ombudsman for Children.

I am asking Dáil Éireann to pass a motion that Dr. Niall Muldoon be reappointed by the President as Ombudsman for Children. Seanad Éireann approved such a resolution last week. On 15 December 2020, the Government supported my intention to arrange for the moving of the requisite resolutions for consideration by both Houses recommending Dr. Muldoon's reappointment for a second term of six years, with effect from 17 February 2021. Dr. Muldoon has served as Ombudsman for Children since his original appointment on 17 February 2015.

The reappointment is proposed in accordance with section 4 of the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002. The legislation provides that the reappointment shall be made by the President upon resolutions passed by Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann.

The Ombudsman for Children may be reappointed only once. The Office of the Ombudsman for Children was established to promote and safeguard the rights and welfare of children. The ombudsman is independent of Government and is accountable to the Oireachtas. My Department has general governance oversight responsibilities in respect of the office, primarily with regard to financial, staffing and other matters. The office will receive Exchequer funding of €2.955 million in 2021. The key functions of the office include promoting and safeguarding the rights and welfare of children, examining and investigating complaints about services provided to children, providing advice regarding children's rights and conducting research on

relevant issues.

I acknowledge and record my appreciation for the work that Dr. Muldoon has done over the past six years. He has worked effectively to ensure that children within the direct provision system could access the services of his office following 17 years during which this was not the case. He was also a key protagonist in the development and setting up of the Barnahus One-house Galway pilot which offers a one-stop shop for children affected by sexual abuse. He has shown a dedication to raising the voices of seldom heard children in Ireland and bringing their issues to the Oireachtas through reports such as, *Take My Hand*, which focuses on children's inpatient adolescent psychiatric units, *No Place Like Home*, which focuses on homeless children living in family hubs, and *Direct Division*, which focuses on children in the direct provision system.

Investigations by the office, such as Molly's case and Jack's case, both of which focused on care for disabled children, have brought about important systemic change in areas such as health, education and child welfare. Over the period of the Covid crisis, Dr. Muldoon has kept a vigilant watch on the work of the Government to ensure that the rights of children are upheld when important decisions are being made, whether that relates to schools, examinations, child welfare or disadvantaged groups.

I recommend the adoption of this resolution by the House in support of Dr. Muldoon's reappointment as Ombudsman for Children by the President. I hope Members will agree that Dr. Muldoon has very capably performed these functions during his first term of office.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I too welcome the reappointment of Dr. Niall Muldoon. He has done a stellar job on behalf of children throughout the State and I am glad he is being reappointed. I acknowledge Dr. Muldoon's report in respect of unmet needs in the assessment of needs for children. We note that the figures have not improved significantly since the issuance of that report. I further acknowledge that Ministers are doing their best to create the right environment for assessment of needs to be conducted in a timely fashion, but they will be conscious that there has been much commentary about the number of children who still require an assessment of needs and that the desktop exercises, or 90-minute assessments, are open to legitimate critique. Dr. Niall Muldoon has stated that there needs to be a dramatic increase in resources such that proper assessments can be carried out and the requisite services would follow every child.

We welcome the reappointment of the Ombudsman for Children. We believe that he has been a stout advocate on behalf of children and calm in his delivery of key messages. It is a source of great comfort to parents and families that there is in this office somebody like Dr. Niall Muldoon who speaks truth to power. He has called out the fact that the statutory timeframe for completion of assessment of needs is not being met. I am aware that this a matter the Government is seeking to address. If we are to have ombudspersons in this State, it is only fair that when they issue reports, we respond in a timely fashion to what they are saying in their reports.

Dr. Muldoon has said that there is need for a tenfold increase in resources. We are not seeing any evidence of that yet. Notwithstanding that additional moneys were made available by the former Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Rabbitte, in respect of assessment of needs, there is still a job of work to be done within individual HSE community healthcare organisation, CHO, areas, where there are still massive variations in terms of meeting the needs of children. Ultimately, this is about children. We cannot skimp when it comes to children.

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We all welcome the reappointment of Dr. Muldoon. All of us throughout the political system have great faith in him. I join in wishing him well in the next part of his tenure and I look forward to him working with the Houses of the Oireachtas and, in particular, the Joint Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration, in respect of his ongoing work and advocacy on behalf of the children of this State.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I commend Dr. Niall Muldoon on the work he has carried out in his capacity as Ombudsman for Children and in advocating for the rights of the child in this country, particularly those who are the most vulnerable in our society whose voice remains largely silent. I am delighted to note he will continue in his role and I look forward to seeing the work that he and his team will focus on for the next few years.

As the Social Democrats spokesperson for children, I congratulate him on speaking out for all the children facing inequality at the hands of our State institutions, including the 6,000 children currently waiting for an assessment of their needs, the 20,000 with special needs currently without schooling during Covid, and the 365 children with disabilities in hospital because they cannot get the appropriate supports to go home safely. I also congratulate him on representing children living in direct provision, those in receipt of State services under Tusla, and those from minority backgrounds, including the Traveller and Roma communities.

Dr. Muldoon has continually highlighted deficiencies in Ireland's legal framework concerning children, including in key areas such as housing, mental health and disability. In all of the work he has carried out he has ensured that children have been consulted and asked for the views. This is incredibly important because often we forget to talk to children about what they want to see happen. Ombudsman reports have often directly quoted from children so that we can hear directly from them about how they feel ashamed, embarrassed and humiliated by the inequalities they have faced. There has been no sugar-coating it. The Ombudsman for Children gives power to children's words so that we, as policymakers, can no longer ignore them. It is apt that Dr. Muldoon quotes Brian Friel, "words are the weapons of the dispossessed". This is exactly what Dr. Muldoon has been able to do in his work to date.

One aspect that stands out from the ombudsman's work is that education continues to be the most complained about issue for children. According to the 2019 annual report, his office received 1,503 complaints, 49% of which related to education, which was an increase on the 42% in respect of 2018. Of the 49%, 75% related to schools, 17% to the Department of Education and 4% were associated with other educational agencies such as the National Council for Special Education and the State Examinations Commission.

Now that we are in a global pandemic, education has again reared its head as one of the most contentious issues facing children during Covid-19. Last March, when schools were facing lockdown, many children's rights activists called for contingency measures to be put in place to avoid the disproportionately negative impact school closures would have on children, especially those with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Ombudsman was part of that call. Dr. Muldoon repeatedly called out concerns about children with additional needs regressing when schools were closed and the impact that closure would have for those children living in poverty or at a socioeconomic disadvantage such as Traveller and Roma children, those living in direct provision or those who are homeless. He warned that long-term school closures would end up exacerbating inequalities these children already face. He was absolutely right about that.

For this reason, since March, I have repeatedly called for a transition task force for children to be established in a cross-departmental capacity and for more representation of children's rights on the board of NPHE to ensure that the needs of children and young people will be met at this most difficult time. Unfortunately, my calls have been left unanswered and we are now witnessing the consequences of that. There have been two periods of school closures, a cancelled leaving certificate examination and one failed reopening of special education. Fortunately, provision for special education will be put in place shortly but there have been many failures in this area and many reports of children regressing and of mental health problems in young people. There is also the problem of the breakdown of trust we have seen between stakeholders and the voice of children remaining silent once again.

We must put children at the centre of what we do, both now and in the future. I want to reiterate something Dr. Muldoon said and which I have raised in the Social Democrats motion on child poverty that was brought forward in the Dáil. We cannot allow children to bear the burden of this pandemic and any economic downturn that we will face as a result of it. That is what happened in the last economic crash. Children bore the burden that we as adults placed on them and they were not protected from the fallout. There is a chance that if we do not protect children as we emerge from the Covid crisis, there could be children in this country who will experience two recessions in their young lives and who will never have had the benefit of an economic recovery at all. We must ensure that children's rights are protected first and foremost.

I congratulate Dr. Muldoon on his reappointment.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am happy to support the reappointment of Dr. Niall Muldoon and I commend him on his work. Precisely because of the nature of his work and the very good job he and his team have done in reporting our failure to vindicate fully the rights of children and young people under 18, I am sure that he would want us to take this opportunity to highlight some of the issues that his reports have covered. It is important to highlight the failure of this State to vindicate the rights of children and young people, despite the regular lip service that is paid on that front.

One key area where we are failing young people and children is in the area of housing. It is to the great shame of this State that, taking the figure for 27 December 2020, there were 2,327 children who were homeless and in emergency accommodation. This is an absolutely shameful failure to vindicate the rights of children and it will mark many of them for life in terms of the damage it does. That crisis continues despite much hand-wringing about it and commitments to address it.

Beyond those who are in emergency accommodation, there are also the hidden homeless living in overcrowded conditions. To give a sample of our failure to vindicate their rights, I will refer to just two cases out of the many that I am dealing with at this time. A single mother who contacted me has three boys, one of them 15 years old, one a baby and the other a toddler. That family is only entitled to a two-bedroom housing provision because all of the children are boys. It is just unbelievable. We are rationing housing to the detriment of those children and their rights are, in my opinion, being breached. Another example is Zoe - she said it was okay to use her first name - who has three children: a 13-year-old daughter and two sons aged seven and nine. She has been on the housing list for 13 years and is living with her parents, both of whom have immunity issues and are susceptible to Covid. The six of them are living in a three-bedroom house. Zoe and her daughter share a bed and that daughter has, at the age of 13, never had a bed of her own. It is absolutely shameful. The father and mother are working at home in

the current Covid situation and Zoe is trying to homeschool the children. It is shameful. Those two examples are only a snapshot of the cases that have been brought to my attention. Zoe applied for a transfer but was refused because she does not have a consultant's letter. Apparently, she needs a letter confirming what any person just looking at her case can see. One does not need to be a medical consultant to know that those children are being failed badly. For a child not to have her own bed for 13 years is, frankly, beyond belief.

Then there are children with disabilities and special needs. Under law, parents of such children are required to get an assessment of needs. The HSE must acknowledge the written application for an assessment of needs within 14 days and an assessment must commence within three months and be completed within six months. A total of 91% of the children assessed are not assessed within the statutory time limit. This is a breach of the most basic rights of the vast majority of these most vulnerable children. Even when the assessment is done and recommendations are made, for example, they might be referred to child and adolescent mental health services, they can be waiting five to ten years to get the services that are recommended. What does all the talk of early intervention mean when some of our most vulnerable children are waiting five or ten years for critical interventions?

My final point concerns the more general situation faced by young people, teenagers and schoolgoers at this time. My heart goes out to them in the situation they are in. It highlights precisely how, at the time when they are most in need of mental health and other supports, we are failing them badly and at many levels. Children are in overcrowded classrooms where they cannot get the sort of individual attention they need in a situation where schooling is difficult or impossible. There is the stress being put on leaving certificate students because of the uncertainty about the examinations and because we ration access to higher level education instead of giving everybody the opportunity to avail of the education they want. These are just some of the issues. I think Dr. Muldoon will be glad they were raised.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This State has carried out very important and good work in the past number of years in investigating and researching how previous generations have treated young children and mothers. Some of the findings that have been published so far are shocking and heartbreaking. It is important that this generation does not overlook the many young children who are in very difficult straits at this time. This focus on our own generation is extremely important because it allows us to have a positive effect and to fix the situations many young people are currently in throughout the country.

I would like to highlight three separate groups of young people and children, explain the difficulty they are in and call on the Minister to do his best to help them. In the past few days, my office has been speaking to family members and parents who send their children to Stepping Stones school in my county of Meath. The children are packed like sardines into tiny prefabricated classrooms with rotting floors, holes in the wall and rat infestations. One parent who helped to found the school told me that it was originally dubbed the school of dreams but has since become known as the house of horrors as the building becomes increasingly unsafe for staff and students alike. Another family I spoke to told me that they have had to stop their children with special needs from watching the news in recent times because it was causing panic attacks and serious stress for them. A party colleague of mine in Cork, Joanne Murphy, has been forced to lie to her son who has autism about the fact that the schools for children with additional needs are being closed in her area, due to the difficulties telling the truth would cause in her family. Other parents have told us about how the lockdown has seen their children significantly regress over the past few months, with children increasingly depressed and anxious

for prolonged periods. A survey of childcare professionals revealed that 74% of providers have confessed to seeing regression of children with special needs and disabilities.

That is why it is critically important that education for children with additional and special needs must be opened fully and immediately. The cost of the lockdown to these families is heart-breaking and it cannot simply be written off as collateral damage of a lockdown. There are approximately 24,000 children throughout the country in mainstream and special schools who are suffering significantly from lockdown and the deprivation of their education. This is in violation of their constitutional right to education. Remote learning is not sufficient for children who are unable to read, who cannot write, who have difficulty speaking and who cannot type. I note that the Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, who is up for reconfirmation today, is of the same opinion. Dr. Muldoon has stated that the blanket closure of schools is not a viable option because of the extraordinary impact it will have on our children and families. Without a doubt, children with disabilities and children from disadvantaged backgrounds will once again be disproportionately affected by Covid-19 school closures.

Many schools for children with special needs have done their best, despite inadequate Government support, to ensure their schools are low risk in terms of transmission. I have spoken to parents and they have told me of cases of Covid-19 that have been in their schools but that have not spread due to the necessary procedures being adhered to.

There are simple measures that the Dáil can take to protect the teachers who are working on the front line. We need to guarantee them proper testing and vaccination and ensure that they have a full supply of personal protective equipment so that we can remove additional threats to their lives and aid their return to schools. The Government has the resources at its disposal to get these children back to school. If we act swiftly, we can give teachers the confidence and allow children with additional needs to resume their education as soon as possible.

By European standards Ireland is one of the lowest investors in childcare. Only approximately 0.01% of our GDP is invested in childcare. Our childcare sector is in perpetual crisis since the access and inclusion model funding to help with additional teachers for children with special needs was cut during the lockdown. The early childhood care and education contract is opted out by the Government. I have been in contact with providers. They have told me they are in debt for tens of thousands of euro, that several of their colleagues have shut down during the crisis and that the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has done little.

I wish to raise the matter of children in direct provision. There are 1,789 children in State-sponsored poverty according to the Irish Centre for Human Rights at NUI Galway. One of the difficulties I have is that the State does not collect any statistics on deaths that happen in direct provision. If we are not collecting information with regard to deaths that are happening of children in direct provision, then how can this generation say that we are doing right with regard to the children who were mistreated in institutions in previous generations?

Deputy Michael Collins: This February will mark 12 months since the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in Ireland. On 12 March 2020 schools throughout the country closed. Dr. Muldoon has said time away from school has left children and young people devoid of school, hobbies, sports and access to close friends. It has been a long and tortuous road for many; for our most disadvantaged and vulnerable children it is doubly so. For those with special needs, the safety, routine and discipline of school is far more than education. It offers a pathway for them to grow

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and learn socially, which is vital if they are to reach their full potential. It is imperative that the Department of Education works with the education partners, public health officials and other relevant stakeholders as a matter of urgency to build on previous planning and put in place a clear comprehensive contingency plan that provides children and their families with the clarity they need now and for the future.

It is about time leaving certificate students were told what is being put in place for them. The battle on the future of the leaving certificate has gone on far too long. It took too long last year for a decision to be made and it is inevitable that a decision will have to be made this year. It could have been made sooner than now. How is it we are still making the same mistakes this year?

I hope Dr. Muldoon will be able to work closer to issues affecting young people in general, like access to beaches and safety for our children. A lady in west Cork has been fighting with me for several years. She sees the need for proper structures to be in place to keep people safe, especially children with disabilities. She wants people kept safe in west Cork near the beaches and so on. That is something we never looked at or never really cared to invest time in. Perhaps the Ombudsman for Children can do that.

I look at organisations like Jack and Friends in Bandon, an autism centre ran by volunteers with no staff. The founders receive no payments for the work they do to support families with children with autism on a daily basis. We need to have a stronger concentration on organisations and this focus needs to be given to these people who give of their time. I know that Claire, Samantha and others in Bandon do phenomenal work on a voluntary basis. I urge the Minister and the Ombudsman for Children to look at and fund these organisations, including Jack and Friends in Bandon. They are taking much of the burden off the State.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this important matter. Children are vulnerable and, as elected representatives, we must do everything to ensure they are properly looked after. This time of virus has been a concerning and upsetting time for many children. They are away from their schools, hobbies and friends.

Many teachers in many schools are entrusted with the job of seeing that children are fed properly, given meals and looked after in certain ways. I worry that they have been missing all this for most of last year and again this year. I sincerely hope these children are not hungry. It is the one reason I hope the schools will be open, especially special needs schools. These special children need special attention and they have been denied that. We know that they go into reverse quickly if their routine is not continued. I hope there will be no other blockage to prevent special needs school children from going back to their schools, crèches and places of care that they were used to attending.

It has been a trying time for all children of school-going age because they are away from their friends, hobbies and sports. We must recognise and hope they will be back doing the things they want to do. Children get tired of being in the one place or being at home in a room if the day is wet or whatever. We need to hope this vaccine is rolled out and that children and teachers can get back to school. The current uncertainty cannot continue or be allowed to arise again in respect of any cohort of children.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: A fellow Donegal man, Dr. Niall Muldoon, was appointed as our second ever Ombudsman for Children in February 2015. I absolutely support the motion that

Dr. Muldoon be reappointed for another term.

Dr. Muldoon has been Ombudsman for Children while we have been experiencing a catastrophic failure in housing policy that has made thousands of children homeless. We have had countless reports and reviews on the issue. The only problem I have with the Office of the Ombudsman for Children is that it does not have the teeth to take action against the Government. It must be tough to receive complaints and heart-breaking stories to report to the Government but to have one's recommendations ignored.

Ireland signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. These rights need to be put on a legislative footing. This major systematic change is required to make a difference. It is what the children around Ireland need.

An urgent need now relates to children with disabilities. We know that there have been major delays in assessment of needs and appropriate supports for families over the years. Now, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed greater failings of the State. The closure of schools, including schools for children with additional needs, during the pandemic meant that many children with additional needs regressed without their structures, routines or required attention. This has even led to children with additional needs being expelled from schools designed specifically to meet their needs. When the schools reopened during the Covid lull, high numbers of children were left without schools to attend. Children with additional needs have a constitutional right to education that is being taken away by the State's failure to provide appropriate supports to schools, teachers, assistants and their families. This is vitally important. As I have said, the Government should be legally held to account by the ombudsman. The Government should reappoint Dr. Muldoon and give him and his team the power to ensure that their recommendations are implemented for the sake of the wains.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the opportunity to give my support to the nomination again of the Ombudsman for Children. Will the Minister make a promise here today that we will have a debate at the very least once a year on the annual report of the ombudsman? It is really worth looking at the report and the ombudsman's submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the list of issues prior to reporting on the fourth periodic examination of Ireland. Reading the two reports together, one could easily despair. Although the ombudsman points to the limited improvements in respect of some legislation, he highlights the more serious issues. I know the Minister is familiar with this, but at this point we have report after report.

One would have to question why we need an ombudsman in the first place, although I am fully supportive of his office. Imagine we need an ombudsman to enforce what should be basic human rights in respect of housing, health, disability and members of minority groups. We need an ombudsman's office to monitor the Health Service Executive, Tusla and local authorities. That in itself is deserving of a debate. I think this is the first time the reports the ombudsman has placed before us have been down as an item for debate. On the previous occasion I think, subject to the Minister's correction, there was absolutely no debate at all. I hope this is the start of a debate.

What are the serious issues the ombudsman is raising? He is raising the most serious issues regarding the absence of mental healthcare for children and the absence of data. We have no proper data. He reinforces the need for housing to be part of the Constitution and the need to look at housing for children and families as a basic human right. He goes on to highlight the

fact that we have failed to ratify the optional protocol to the disability convention. He also tells us we need to ratify the second optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The very last page calls on us to ratify the optional protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography without further delay. Imagine we need an ombudsman to tell us this is what we need to do for children.

The Minister is a relatively new Minister, and I am not here to harangue him, but let us do things differently, as I have said to him before. If we have an ombudsman and reports, let us have time in the Dáil to look at the good things that have happened and the gaps and the serious issues that this man and his office of 20-something staff are raising with us. They are pleading with us to look at this and to do something about it. Giving the thumbs up to the ombudsman is good - who could object to that? - but far more useful would be to have a debate on what the Government thinks are its next steps. When will the promised review of the Children Act be done? What about the mental health legislation we have been promised a review and an update on? There has been none of that.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for accommodating me. Since its establishment in 2004, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children has played a pivotal role in promoting and further enhancing the welfare and rights of children in Ireland. I commend the current ombudsman, Dr. Niall Muldoon, on the work he has overseen over the past six years. I often speak to people - obviously, all of us are in the same situation as part of our work - and I frequently hear complimentary and positive feedback about the office and the work it does. Dr. Muldoon leads an office that is open, approachable and transparent, and I take this opportunity to commend him on the leadership he has shown in the role. It says something about the office he runs that everybody seems to be in agreement here today, which is great.

The importance of independence from the Government and from any external pressure is so important to the essential function of the ombudsman's work. Dr. Muldoon's background in clinical psychology and child protection makes him highly qualified to ensure that children are properly respected and listened to. There have been several important pieces of work from the ombudsman's office. The most recent report, Unmet Needs, published in October of last year, examined the challenges faced by children who require an assessment of their needs. The findings of the report were stark and raised serious concerns about the ongoing violations on the part of this Government of the rights of children with disabilities. The report made a series of recommendations. The ombudsman appeared before the committee on children recently and was scathing of the Government's record in addressing lengthy delays faced by children and their families, extensive delays despite the legal requirement to begin an assessment of needs within three months of receiving an application.

This report shows that the ombudsman's office has been a strong advocate for children with disabilities and their families and that it aggressively pursues the rights of children, which is exactly what we need the Office of the Ombudsman for Children to do. The focus of its work must be to ensure that the Government and Government agencies take a child-centred and rights-based approach when dealing with the welfare of children. Going forward, it is important that the ombudsman continues to highlight the rights of children: their right to education, to live in a safe home, to healthcare, to food and nutrition, to practise their religions or cultures and speak their own languages, and to be empowered to be the best versions of themselves.

The most recent work on life in lockdown for children living in direct provision during the Covid-19 pandemic shows the importance of the independence of the office. There is little

doubt that direct provision poses many challenges for children normally, not to mention during a pandemic. It is so important that children in Ireland are given every opportunity to enjoy safe, fulfilling and happy lives. This is particularly significant as we reflect collectively on recent weeks, in particular everything to do with the mother and baby institutions. It is evident to all that we have a fairly shameful track record when it comes to defending the rights of children in this country. The work of the ombudsman must robustly challenge the Government of the day and hold Ministers and Departments to account, and the ombudsman's office must not be simply a talking shop. It needs to examine and expose wrongdoing when it feels that children's rights have been violated. It is so important that children's rights are promoted and protected in the actions and decisions of Government bodies, including hospitals, schools and child protection services, that the service is easy for children and their families to use, and that it provides an impartial and safe environment in which children and their families can raise concerns.

I appeal to the Minister and other Government representatives to listen to the work of the ombudsman and his office as they have been doing excellent work. I wish them every success with it in the future.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I thank the Deputies on all sides of the House for their contributions to the debate on the motion. It is my pleasure to recommend to the House that Dr. Niall Muldoon be reappointed by the President to be the Ombudsman for Children. Dr. Muldoon comes to this post with a wealth of experience. He has served very effectively as Ombudsman for Children over the past six years. He has previously served as director of investigations at the Office of the Ombudsman for Children. He is a registered clinical and counselling psychologist and was formerly the national clinical director of CARI, the children's charity. He also has extensive experience working in the area of child protection. In Dr. Muldoon I am fully satisfied we have a well-qualified, experienced and suitable nominee for reappointment as our Ombudsman for Children.

I very much welcome the significant work Dr. Muldoon has already done as Ombudsman for Children. The role of Ombudsman for Children is an integral part of what is a very significant framework supported and enabled by the Oireachtas to help improve the lives of our children and young people. I am confident that Dr. Niall Muldoon will continue to bring his extensive experience and knowledge to the position, and I am happy to put forward this resolution, namely, that the House recommends Dr. Muldoon for reappointment by the President to be the Ombudsman for Children.

Question put and agreed to.

Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020: Motion

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 (Covid-19: employment wage subsidy scheme) (Date Adjustment) Order 2021,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 22nd January, 2021.

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Following a debate last week on the Covid restrictions support scheme, the resolution for debate today seeks the approval of the House for another order which also recognises the challenges faced by businesses across the economy arising from level 5 public health restrictions and provides for additional support to be given under the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS.

The latest change to the scheme is in the context of unprecedented levels of support that are being provided by the Government to assist businesses and workers in Ireland throughout this pandemic. To date, additional expenditure of well over €13 billion has been paid out, with more still planned in 2021 to support businesses and to help citizens to manage financially in the midst of these very, very difficult times. Sums of more than €1 billion have been approved for more than 50,000 business under a range of measures that the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, has put in place. Supports are also available to assist businesses in moving online. The Revenue Commissioners have also assisted businesses through a debt warehousing programme, with 70,000 businesses putting tax liabilities of almost €2 billion into these schemes. As of 28 January 2021, 58,300 claims for payments of €244.2 million in respect of 20,100 premises have been made under the CRSS. Nearly €6 billion has been spent on the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP.

In addition to these measures, the wage subsidy schemes have been the central pillar of our response to this disease. The temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, was in place from March until the end of August. Some 66,500 employers received payments of almost €2.9 billion in respect of more than 664,000 employees. To date, more than 44,800 employers and 505,600 employees have been supported by the EWSS, with subsidies of more than €1.7 billion being paid out and PRSI credit of €303 million being granted by 28 January. This is an economy-wide support scheme.

The primary employer qualification is based on the employer's turnover in the current six-month period being less, compared with the pre-pandemic position period in 2019. The legislation provides that the employer must be able to demonstrate that it is operating at no more than 70% in either the turnover of business or the customer orders received by the employer by reference to the period from 1 January to 30 June 2021 compared with the equivalent period in 2019. This is a flexible scheme that has been quickly administered by Revenue. Where practical, payments are being made within two working days after payroll. I wish to take this opportunity to thank and recognise the Revenue Commissioners for their extraordinary work. The level of subsidy given to the employer is based on the number of paid workers on payroll per week and a flat, per-head value rate is applied based on prospective pay levels so that claims may also be made for new hires or seasonal workers.

Following the reintroduction of level 5 restrictions in October 2020, the Government decided that from 20 October the subsidy would be up to €350. Weekly rates of subsidy are made available to the employer on the basis of the income of the employee. The subsidy payable is nil for employees paid less than €151.50 per week or more than €1,462 per week. As set out in the Finance Act 2020, the enhanced rates were to be in place until 31 January 2021, after which they were due to return to the original rate of €151.50 for those paid more than €151.50 per week and €203 for those paid more than €203 per week. However, given all that has happened with public health, it was decided that the current EWSS rates will be maintained until 31 March. This is aligned with the structure of the PUP. This is considered essential because in the absence of such an alignment, there would be a risk of migration of employees from the EWSS to the PUP during the current level 5 restrictions, thus undermining the very purpose of

this scheme. To the maximum extent possible, the objective is to maintain a position whereby as many employees as possible who are currently on the EWSS retain their link with the employer rather than migrating to the PUP and losing their connection with the employer. Recent trends on this scheme indicate that it also plays an important role in getting people back to work as public health measures are eased, thereby reducing the number who depend on the PUP.

Section 28B of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides that as Minister for Finance, I may vary certain aspects of the scheme by ministerial order. The aspects of the scheme that may be amended in this way relate to the end date of the measure, which may be extended to a date no later than 30 June 2021, the rate of subsidy that may apply and the applicable employee income thresholds to which such rates will apply, as well as the criteria of the turnover test that determines the qualifying employers. The exercise of this power is subject to specified conditions and the legislation sets out several steps to be taken before an order varying the scheme can validly be made. As Minister for Finance, I have a duty to monitor the scheme and make regular assessments of whether it is necessary to adjust certain elements of the scheme to fulfil the objectives of providing the necessary stimulus to the economy, mitigating the effects of this awful disease on the economy and facilitating the furtherance of any of the purposes specified in section 28A(3) of the Act, which includes sufficient use of Exchequer resources and the protection of the public finances.

Following the completion of such an assessment, if the view is formed, having consulted with my colleagues, the Ministers for Social Protection and Public Expenditure and Reform, as Minister for Finance I am empowered to amend such elements by way of secondary legislation. Such an order shall not be made unless a draft is laid before Dáil Éireann and a resolution approving the draft is passed by the House. I can, therefore, confirm that I intend to exercise the powers conferred by section 28B of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 and the necessary steps have been taken to comply with the legislation. First, regular assessments have been carried out, noting the utilisation of the EWSS, the continuing challenges facing the economy from the pandemic and, indeed, Exchequer cost. Second, I have formally consulted my colleagues, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, and have determined that it is necessary that the current rates remain in place until 31 March.

The estimated cost of the extension of the enhanced rates is €38 million per week, to be met from the voted expenditure of the Department of Social Protection, noting that this additional cost is considered a subset of the overall cost estimate of the latest public health restrictions. The draft regulations, entitled the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 (Covid-19: employment wage subsidy scheme) (Date Adjustment) Order 2021, were laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 22 January. The resolution before the House approves this order. I commend it to the House.

I will conclude by noting that the operation of the EWSS and its effectiveness continues to be kept under the closest of reviews. While there are no plans to revisit the core eligibility criteria for the EWSS at this time, the Government's position is that there will be no cliff edge to the EWSS. In that regard, it is noted that the legislation implementing the measures provides that it will be in place until 31 March 2021, but also provides that the scheme may be extended until the end of June if required, subject to the same procedural conditions I have set out. It is likely that some form of continued support will be necessary to the end of 2021 to help to maintain viable businesses and employment and to provide businesses with certainty to the maximum extent possible.

4 o'clock

Decisions on the form and level of this support will take account of emerging circumstances and economic and health conditions as they become clearer. In the interim, I commend this resolution to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Am I to take it that Deputies Mairéad Farrell and Kerrane will take the Sinn Féin slot?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It will be me.

An Ceann Comhairle: I could not see the Deputy; my apologies.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I was tucked away so the Ceann Comhairle could not see me. I will take five minutes and the balance will be shared between my colleagues, if that is okay.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak this afternoon on the motion to extend the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS. I very much welcome the extension of the existing rates of the EWSS until 31 March. It is something for which Sinn Féin has been calling for a number of weeks and it is welcome that the Government has finally got around to putting the motion before the House. It is timely that we are having the debate here today.

Extending the EWSS will provide continued support and much-needed certainty for workers and employers amid the ongoing level 5 restrictions. We all know that the EWSS is needed to combat the possibility of unemployment and perhaps it will be needed for a period after we overcome this virus through a combination of public health measures such as social distancing and, more importantly, a widespread vaccination programme. We need to be alert to the fact that it is quite possible the continuation of this scheme may be required even beyond the public health emergency and as the virus goes into retreat, as we hope it will, there is a case to be made for the extension of the scheme even beyond that time to facilitate workers whose businesses will take a while to get back up and running and to ensure we minimise job losses to the greatest extent possible. With that in mind, I ask the Minister to put in place a firm plan for the continuation of the EWSS after the end of March.

In his contribution, the Minister referenced the need to avoid what he referred to as a “cliff edge”. That also means not postponing the cliff edge. There needs to be some degree of certainty. We know this public health emergency will not end overnight and will extend beyond March, into the summer and possibly even further, depending on how our vaccination programme is rolled out. At the moment, there is what from the outside looks like a staggering level of ineptitude at the level of the European Commission as a whole, especially in the office of the President of the Commission, as it relates to the procurement of vaccine, which combined with the ineptitude of our Minister for Health, and it gives me no pleasure to say that, means it looks like we are a long way off vaccinating the whole population.

I want to raise a point with the Minister because it is something that has been raised with me and I feel duty-bound to pass it on. Countless times in the past number of weeks, I have been contacted by workers who have referred to the structure of the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, and the tax bill they have faced. This causes massive concern for many work-

ers and their families. The Minister's decision to base the wage subsidy on net pay has resulted in what amounts, effectively, to a double deduction for workers. The TWSS was calculated as a percentage of an employee's previous net weekly earnings rather than gross weekly earnings. In other jurisdictions, such as Denmark and the North of this island, wage subsidies were calculated as a percentage of the employee's previous gross weekly earnings, not their earnings after tax, and was at that stage subjected to tax. Tax and payments that were calculated as a percentage of net earnings effectively amount to a double deduction for these workers and they asked me to relay that message to the Minister. He needs to explain to those workers why it was not based on gross weekly earnings because we have ended up in a serious situation where workers are saying that a double deduction is applying to them.

Do not get me wrong, those workers are very appreciative of the EWSS, the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and all of the support schemes but there are a number of workers out there who believe themselves to be entitled to a redundancy payment and we know there is, effectively, a moratorium on redundancy payments. Those workers are keen to have a two-way engagement around the moratorium. Many have contacted my office seeking a discussion on a contingency plan to ensure that workers can access redundancy if they wish in a way that does not put businesses into financial jeopardy. I appreciate that at the time these measures were brought in, it was not anticipated that they would have to last for as long as they have, but that necessitates a further conversation. All that those workers want is a two-way conversation.

I have only one chance to speak in the Chamber today so I will raise with the Minister the issue of the Debenhams workers who have today been on strike for 300 days. They have stood steadfast and campaigned with what can be described as only bravery and, indeed, dignity. All they want is for their collective agreement to be honoured and for a fair and decent redundancy to be paid to them. Last week, we saw nearly 500 workers across Arcadia Group find themselves in the same situation. They also want their collective agreement to be honoured. Not only should the Government take steps to ensure the Mandate workers can benefit to the full extent from the money the Government has promised, €3 million, but we should also expedite legislation to ensure we do not have a Debenhams mark 3 or Debenhams mark 4 and so on. That would be a fitting legacy for what these brave workers have been forced to go through.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Mar is eol don Aire, tá muidne i Sinn Féin tar éis tacú le fanacht agus dul chun cinn an EWSS go dtí an 31 Márta. Tuigimid cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an scéim seo i gcomhair na ndaoine atá ag brath ar an airgead seo. Ar ndóigh, an rud atá mé féin chun caint faoi ná na daoine sin atá ag iarraidh morgáiste a fháil agus nach féidir leo mar gheall go bhfuil siad ar an scéim seo. Impím ar an Aire labhairt leis na bainc faoi seo mar is rud uafásach é do na daoine sin nach bhfuil in ann morgáiste a fháil mar gheall air sin.

I raise the issue of those who are being refused a mortgage as a result of accessing the EWSS. I first point out that we in Sinn Féin welcomed the extension of the existing rate of the EWSS until 31 March. We welcomed it on the basis that it would provide continued support and much-needed certainty for workers and their employers amid continued level 5 restrictions. We believed that was absolutely necessary. Sinn Féin has been constructive in the operation of the wage subsidy schemes. We sought to ensure increased rates for low-paid workers and for the inclusion of women returning from maternity leave under the TWSS. That is, of course, extremely important. We consistently argued for increased rates under the new EWSS when it was first introduced in September. We felt it was clear that wage supports will be necessary for some time to stave off the scourge of unemployment and their design will, of course, require ongoing consideration and the slow roll-out of the vaccine has further underlined that necessity.

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Having said that, however, we in Sinn Féin also recognise that the money spent on the TWSS, as well as on the PUP and on the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, have been massive State subsidies to a private sector comprised of households and businesses. These State subsidies have been supported by Sinn Féin because we see them as serving the greater good. They have managed to keep many people who would otherwise be out of work connected to their employers. They have kept many businesses going that would otherwise have been liquidated. They have also allowed borrowers - individuals and corporate customers alike - to continue making repayments. That is why I find it so shocking and deeply concerning that some lenders and brokers are still refusing to accept an application for a mortgage from somebody who is on the EWSS. I find it incredible that this could be allowed.

An awful lot of constituents have contacted me. We know how precarious the housing situation is; I am sure I do not need to tell this Chamber how difficult it is for many people, and those in Galway city are no exception to that rule. Numerous constituents have come to me because they have found themselves in this situation. They have asked me what they can do and there is very little that can be done when one person in a couple is on the EWSS and the couple simply cannot get a mortgage although all their ducks are in a row. They are now facing a situation where they will be unable to stay in their rented accommodation and are facing homelessness because they simply cannot get mortgage approval. We need to remember that the State remains the key player in the financial sector, just as it is now a key player in the labour market in general. In case the Government needs reminding, in the financial sector it holds a majority stake in both AIB and Permanent TSB to the tune of 75% and it holds a 14% stake in Bank of Ireland. I cannot think of any other shareholder with such a major stake that takes this kind of hands-off approach. It is clear that the restrictions will last for some time. We are all aware of that, so schemes such as the EWSS will be with us throughout 2021 to support people. We must ensure that the Government addresses the fact that people cannot get a mortgage because they are on the EWSS. I urge the Minister to do that.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I join with my colleagues in welcoming the extension of the employment wage subsidy scheme at the existing rates. I note that a similar announcement has been made on the pandemic unemployment payment, which is welcome. In the case of the PUP, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, has said that in the coming weeks the Government will be looking at a possible extension beyond 31 March. It is now February, so I ask that the Minister would do likewise for the EWSS. It is important that workers and families have a bit of certainty as they go through the month of February and into March. It is especially important given the Government's inaction today in terms of helping those very people with growing bills which is a major concern, but it is not something on which the Government is going to take action.

As is the case with the PUP, the upper limit is €350 for all those earning in excess of €400 and all those workers are on reduced income. A big issue arises in that, regrettably, mortgage breaks have not been announced. I ask the Minister to examine the matter again. The banks should be doing their bit in the middle of the pandemic.

Deputy Ged Nash: I thank the Minister for presenting this important motion this afternoon. The Labour Party fully supports the motion and the extension of the EWSS going forward. The TWSS, and its successor the EWSS, have been an extraordinarily important initiative taken by the Government. It has literally been a lifesaver for countless businesses and workers across the country.

The Minister might recall that a couple of short years ago the Labour Party and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions separately called for the development of such a scheme to help to counteract the then threat of a potential hard Brexit in the event of no deal being agreed. We have been discussing the principle of wage subsidy schemes in this House and outside for some time and now it is a reality to support businesses and jobs across the country. It has been a considerable success. The Minister admitted that the scheme will, in effect, be extended to the end of the year to deal with the reality of the situation currently for so many businesses and workers.

I believe the wage subsidy scheme, or something of this nature, must become a permanent feature of the labour market, in particular to assist workers with the just transition. So many workers and businesses are at risk as we move towards a zero-carbon situation and schemes like this will be most important. If they are to become embedded in the system, it is important that they evolve and that the State ensures that we get better outcomes for workers and businesses. For that reason, in the context of our pre-budget proposals late last year, the Labour Party proposed a German-style short time working scheme which we called ObairGhear. It would involve attaching conditions around training, upskilling, productivity for access to schemes and also that employers obtaining benefits from such schemes would ensure no lay-offs would occur for the duration of their involvement in such schemes. We also believe any such schemes should be conditional on the recognition of trade unions and collective agreements applying to workers in such employment.

I will briefly turn to the issue of the EWSS and mortgages. Last October, I lifted the lid on the practice of banks, including State-owned banks such as Permanent TSB and AIB, asking mortgage applicants whether their employer was availing of the EWSS. Not only has this practice continued in recent months, but it has escalated. I have been contacted by numerous people, mainly couples who are first-time buyers and who are now being denied drawdown on their mortgage by banks due to their employer being registered on the EWSS. The Minister and his team might be familiar with one such case, that of Adele and her partner, who have written to him directly on this issue. Adele is not a pseudonym. She has consented to her name being identified, such is her frustration at the way she has been treated. She and her partner, like many others across the country, who I have been directly helping, are now in a fight to secure their home with their bank, which has explicitly stated it will not proceed with the mortgage because the “employer is availing of the wage subsidy”. The implications of this statement are massive. More than 300,000 workers and some 30,000 employers are availing of the scheme. This is at the height of a national housing crisis that predates the Covid pandemic. There is now a very real danger that the recent publication of the list of employers receiving the EWSS on the Revenue website may serve as a mortgage blacklist, even if the customer himself or herself does not qualify to have his or her pay subsidised through the scheme by virtue of the fact that he or she might be a higher earner.

As Adele stated to the Minister in her email, the bank’s behaviour is nothing short of “disgraceful”. She said banks are stabbing people in the back. I noted a similar case in the *Irish Independent* yesterday. The Minister might be familiar with it. Banks are performing U-turns only after pressure from lawyers, Deputies like me or by journalists asking tricky questions. This is not the way business should be done in this country. For every person who is fighting against the banks, there are countless more who do not have the time, energy or resources to do so. I urge the Minister to give a firm commitment to the House to deal with this form of mortgage blacklisting and ensure that no other homeowner, whose means support their application, is put in this position.

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I do not reference my constituent, Adele, to in any way ambush the Minister. He may not have seen that particular case himself although his team may have. I am sure he will respond to it in due course. I reference Adele because her case illustrates a wider problem. Hundreds of individuals across the country whom I have dealt with in recent months are in the exact same situation. That is deeply unfair, and it needs to be resolved.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Minister for bringing the motion on this extremely important subject, the EWSS, to the House today. I thank him for his work on this, for putting the scheme in place and for its efficiencies to date. It is fair to say that without it we would have more than 300,000 employees who would either be on substantially lower incomes or who may not be in work at all. This transfer from the State to families directly is able to keep people paying existing mortgages and allow them to continue with their lifestyle and employment. Employment is the most important issue for any household to maintain itself.

I thank the Minister for his work in that regard but also for the role he has played in Europe. It is fair to say that none of this would have been possible without the sort of cohesion that has been generated with the participation of the Minister. It is very welcome that the ECB and other institutions have been able to take a very different approach now than was the case previously in 2011 when we did not have an opportunity to take countercyclical stimulus measures of this kind, or indeed other kinds, and where the pressures were very different. That is only possible for a number of reasons. One is that we had a well-run economy going into the pandemic, where there was close to full employment in technical terms. We had good jobs, and we still have good jobs and the opportunity to create more and we have had an activated and engaged labour market using the skills it has. To be able to ride out this crisis and get through it we need the type of supports that ensure people can stay with their employer. This scheme has been doing that extremely well.

It is also fair to say that the existence of the scheme and its efficiency have been able to contribute to our income tax performance, which has been better than all of our predictions and those of the Department. I accept it is a circular process. One of the aspects of the scheme that has been so helpful to businesses, especially small businesses and employees in them, is the certainty that the EWSS model has given them. They can continue to get through the difficulties of lockdowns and the difficulties they face in other parts of their lives knowing there is a degree of income security in their house for those who are eligible to avail of it. I urge the Minister to continue to provide that certainty.

I appreciate the motion before the House and the fact that the deadline under the Act is the end of June. It is clear that the restriction of activities may go beyond that time and some businesses will need continued support thereafter. I ask the Minister to discuss this with his Government colleagues and provide certainty for businesses as soon as possible. Businesses need different types of certainty. Businesses that can continue to generate income need certainty around the timing of the ending of relevant schemes. They need sufficient notice, whether that be six, eight or 12 weeks, to be able to transition their employees back onto a different pay model. I refer here to businesses that have a significant revenue stream and are able to continue with activity but there is, of course, another class of business that has had no activity for a very long time, predominantly in the hospitality industry.

The Government has taken a range of steps to provide ample support to the hospitality industry, including the EWSS and a reduction in VAT but in many cases, these businesses have not had the opportunity to claw back the benefits of same because they have been closed. I give

the example of an hotel in my area which engaged in substantial investment in the last number of years. The hotel accrued profits and invested them in the redevelopment of the hotel. It was achieving four-star status, had significant commercial loans which it was more than amply servicing and had approximately 80 employees. The hotel is managing through this crisis and doing what it can with its employees to continue to invest and improve the hotel for when it reopens. Of course, the VAT reduction was very welcome but because of the lockdown, this business has not really been able to enjoy the benefit of it because it has not generated sufficient revenue. For businesses like this one, and countless others around Dublin and the rest of the country, the extension of the EWSS is important in itself but it is also an opportunity, if particular consideration can be given to that sector, for them to try to claw back some of the lost revenue in circumstances where they have had to continue to service commercial loans of the kind I have described. There is something slightly different about these businesses *vis-à-vis* those that have been able to continue to trade, albeit on a reduced basis. As we come out of the lockdown and hopefully move into a more nuanced period of economic planning, I hope the Minister will be in a position to consider sectoral solutions of that kind.

The mortgage issue raised by other Deputies is such a difficult one to resolve. I have had the same issue raised with me and I understand the difficulties at the moment in terms of security of income from the perspective of lenders generally. This is causing difficulties and leaving people stuck, including those who have - or hope they have - stable jobs, incomes and deposits. The overall impact is going to be on housing market activity and activation and people may be stuck in rental accommodation for longer than is necessary. I appreciate the risk issue from the perspective of banks generally but this is affecting people who are not at fault. There is nothing they can do and it is an ongoing problem.

I thank the Minister for bringing this motion before the House today. The EWSS has been an absolute lifesaver for businesses in Ireland, particularly small businesses and the hospitality sector more generally. Without this measure and without the support that the State was able to acquire and then provide to our businesses and their employees, we would be in a very dark place indeed. It is extremely welcome and I thank the Minister for his efforts in Europe to ensure it can be continued. The more certainty that the Minister can provide to employers and businesses over the next 12 months, which we hope will be very different to last 12 months, the better.

Deputy Pa Daly: I was contacted this week by a start-up company after the Revenue Commissioners adjudged that it did not submit strong enough evidence that its turnover had decreased by more than 25% during last year's trading. This is one of the criteria used to determine "significant negative economic disruption". While I understand the need for some parameters, the company lost a number of contracts due to Covid-19 and can prove it. This is, unquestionably, significant economic disruption by any measure. Other supports are insufficient to keep this business operating and employing staff. These are people who want to create and sustain jobs, which are sorely needed in Kerry, rather than survive on subsidies. The goal of the EWSS is supposed to be exactly that and the spirit of the scheme needs to take precedence in this type of situation. This will continue to be an issue as we face two long years of disruption and no business will have been left untouched by the pandemic.

There have been a number of issues with the EWSS and its predecessor. We must ensure it is fit for purpose. Over the next two years, once the Covid-19 restrictions are lifted and the vaccination programme is completed, life will return to normal but businesses cannot be expected to be completely stagnant in that period. Not only will we lose businesses that contribute

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employment and revenue to the Exchequer, but we will also strangle new businesses that are so badly needed in the west of Ireland, particularly in Kerry. The long period of disruption will also have a severe impact on the biggest source of jobs in Kerry which is tourism. As the Minister probably knows, over 16,000 Kerry workers are employed in tourism and many of them were shut out of the Covid-19 PUP and TWSS schemes due to seasonality. Last year most of the season was missed, at the loss of €400 million to the economy in Kerry. However, when businesses could open, people flocked to Kerry and businesses thrived for that very short period which proves that they are viable. There is an enormous appetite among people to follow the advice of NPHEAT and not go abroad but with no certainty about how long the season will be, allowance needs to be made within the EWSS for seasonal businesses.

The Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, was introduced to further support those in the hospitality and tourism sectors but it ignores any business lacking an on-premises customer experience and excludes a number of outdoor and activity-based tour operators, wholesalers and travel agents working remotely. These businesses are struggling to reopen and are facing permanent closure. In that context, I ask the Minister to extend the scheme. The recently announced tourism recovery fund will help some of these operators and while I welcome it, it is months late and should not have been necessary. We seem to have a trend of stressing businesses to the maximum and only then intervening. Extending the EWSS should ensure that it is accessible to those who need it and should offer those who have spent years, if not decades, adjusting their lives around seasonal business some reassurance. Kerry is the county most affected, according to all surveys.

Finally, it is 300 days since the start of the Debenhams picket and once again I pay tribute to Geraldine, Amy, Trish and the many others who have maintained their vigil at the former Tralee store. I understand that Mandate has recently written to the Taoiseach but has yet to receive a reply. I call on the Government to intervene even at this late stage to help the Debenhams workers. If ever proof was needed of the inequity in the system between workers and capital, this is it. I ask the Government to recognise the right to collective bargaining and to implement the recommendations of the Duffy Cahill report as soon as possible. State supports such as the EWSS should not be available to companies that do not recognise the right of workers to organise.

An Ceann Comhairle: The next contributor listed is Deputy Gannon but níl sé anseo and neither is Deputy O'Connor. Is Deputy MacSharry here for Deputy O'Connor?

Deputy Marc MacSharry: No, I am here in my own right. I understood that myself and Deputy Dillon were sharing time.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is a slot available now but if the Deputy does not want to take it-----

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I am happy to take it.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has eight minutes and if Deputy Dillon comes in, he can share that time with Deputy MacSharry.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: If he comes in, the Ceann Comhairle might point that out to me. I am glad to have the opportunity to engage with the Minister and Minister of State and make a few points. Obviously, it is common sense for us, as per the motion, to extend the EWSS without which the misery of the last nine or ten months would have been much worse

for people throughout the country. Initially it was pitched at the wrong level, perhaps, but we amended it fairly quickly to give people some level of support while at the same time ensuring we maintained the link between employee and employer. This will be critical when we manage to reopen, which we hope will be in the nearer rather than longer term as the vaccine situation improves.

I seek clarification on an issue that is not specifically related to the EWSS. Obviously, many people are working from home at this moment in time. An issue is beginning to surface with these people. For people with modest means, bills for the telephone, broadband, electricity and so on may become significant. They may have been in a position to deal with those costs over the past nine or ten months while all the family was based at home and, perhaps, the husband and wife or couple were working from home. I understand that a modest relief may be claimed by people who are working from home. Perhaps the Minister will clarify that in his response. I believe the relief to be of the order of €3.50 per day which, over a long period of time, can amount to a significant amount of money. There seems to be some confusion as to whether the onus is on the employee or on the employer with regard to the relief. It is unclear if the employer is to provide this money and then claim it back from Revenue or whether it is for the individual employee to claim the relief in his or her own annual return. I would appreciate it if the Minister could provide some clarity in that regard.

I believe both Ministers are on record as saying that, while this extension is to last until 31 March, and my God do we all yearn for an improvement in the number of Covid cases and an increase in the number vaccinated which would permit a return to work or some level of normality at that date, our most optimistic forecasts do not remotely suggest such a date. An extension of these supports will, therefore, be required. I know the Minister has indicated that they can be extended to June 2021 but, in reality, we need to send a message loud and clear to the people that we are prepared to extend it for the entirety of the year so that we can deal with the Covid problem while at the same time ensuring that people are given adequate support, that they will not be left behind, and that the budget will be provided for that.

I notice Deputy Dillon has now joined us. I will pass over to him in just a couple of seconds, with the permission of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I reiterate the call I made to the Ministers last week with regard to the extension of the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, to more businesses. I gave a very detailed example last week of 17 wholesale bottlers that require admission to the scheme, but there are many more such firms. On the enterprise side, the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, is very much in favour of this. I hope he will not find the Ministers' Departments wanting in providing for it. A safe and fair way to do this might be to extend it to any business that currently does not qualify but which is subject to a commercial rates bill.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this important motion today. Last month, I welcomed clarification from the Minister for Finance that the period for determining eligibility for the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, during the first and second quarters of 2021 is to be the same period in 2019. This will elicit a sigh of relief from many employers and their employees. There were early complaints about the scheme arising from issues such as the processing of wage subsidy payments to employers taking up to six weeks. I understand that the revised payment schedule is now, thankfully, ensuring speedier delivery. This, in turn, will support and boost cash flow within businesses.

I commend the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, on the EWSS as there have been very few issues with the scheme over recent months, with one exception. There are, however, concerns

emerging about the uncertainty as to whether it will be extended in its current form beyond late March. An issue being raised with me increasingly over recent weeks has been the extension of the EWSS beyond 31 March 2021. I appreciate the Minister's opening statement that there will be discussions on this matter. Both employers and employees are fearful that they may lose the enhanced rates which are in place until that date. I urge the Minister to extend the scheme for as long as possible and until the vaccination roll-out programme has reached a critical mass and we can avoid a cliff edge. Almost 1,200 businesses in Mayo availed of the EWSS during 2020 and it is serving as a vital support for those businesses in a wide range of sectors that have had to close their doors for significant durations during this pandemic.

On a separate note, I welcome the recent announcement of the tourism business continuity scheme. Some €55 million will be provided to employers who fall outside the Covid restrictions support scheme. While it is a step in the right direction, it still falls short. I regret to say that there are still some businesses which do not meet the eligibility criteria for the scheme, which I understand to have been designed for those ineligible for the CRSS. There are businesses connected to the tourism sector, including laundry service providers to the hospitality sector and audiovisual engineering providers in the entertainment sector. These businesses are truly on their knees while other businesses are in receipt of supports.

I implore Departments and Ministers, including Deputies Catherine Martin, Humphreys and Michael McGrath, to work together to find suitable funding for those falling between the cracks considering the range of support schemes available. Just because they do not have premises to which the public have access, it does not mean that they are immune to the economic impact of this pandemic. Significant collaboration between Departments is needed as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. An tAire will recognise that my party and I worked constructively to address many of the gaps in the old temporary wage subsidy scheme, ensuring a higher rate of subsidy for low-paid workers and the inclusion of women returning from maternity leave. As he will know, I was critical of the new scheme that was introduced in September of last year on the grounds that it significantly cut the levels of wage support for workers. I warned the Minister at the time, and have consistently done so since, that the Government was walking into a jobs crisis if the rates of wage support were not enhanced. I am thankful that, on 20 October, the Government changed direction and enhanced these rates in a decision which I welcomed. However, the Minister made clear at that time that the enhanced rates would only last until 31 January, after which they would again be cut to the lower rates of €203 and €151.50, arbitrary rates that risked another cliff edge. As I said on 6 January, to make this cut during the period of level 5 restrictions, which were all but certain to continue beyond January, would be reckless and would lead to wage subsidies being cut for more than 300,000 workers. At that time, I called on the Government to extend the existing rates until at least 31 March 2021. I welcome the fact that the Government has now done so with this motion.

In January alone, payments of €331 million were paid out to 44,800 employers, supporting the salaries of 315,200 workers. This is money well spent. Had the Government not supported incomes and businesses through deficit spending, it would be a different story. What is now a supply shock would have become a demand-side crisis with permanent job losses and business failure. The deficit has served its purpose and we must now turn our attention to the future.

Recovery will take time. In its most recent quarterly bulletin, the Central Bank suggested that employment will not recover to pre-pandemic levels until 2022. Given that this is the case, wage supports must remain a feature of our economy in the medium term. Workers and em-

ployers cannot afford uncertainty, cliff edges or last-minute announcements from Government. Workers and businesses need assurance that wage supports will remain in place beyond March.

We must also be ready to put in place longer term solutions. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. While we introduced schemes that subsidise a fixed proportion of wages, others utilised short-time working schemes whereby employers pay their employees for hours worked while the State compensates employees for a portion of their pay for lost hours. Germany had such a scheme in place for more than a decade, which helped stave off the high levels of unemployment seen elsewhere during the previous recession. Short-time working schemes are a well-known and successful labour market tool to reduce unemployment which the Minister should consider as a long-term tool.

I will finish by commenting on an issue which has affected a great many workers. It must be remembered that the Government calculated the subsidies under the wage subsidy scheme as a percentage of net earnings or take-home pay after tax. These earnings have now been taxed and workers are subject to what is, in effect, a double deduction from their pay. In the North, in Britain and in Denmark, wage subsidies were calculated as a percentage of gross pay, which was then subject to tax. There was no double deduction in those jurisdictions and no taxing of net pay, which is in itself an oxymoron. The decision by Government to act differently here was foolish and unnecessary. I cannot overstate the level of anger and frustration felt by many of these workers. The fault lies squarely with the Government.

I will finish by saying that as we move forward, I look forward to working with the Minister to ensure we have the supports in place to support workers, employment and our economic recovery. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Táimid ag bogadh ar aghaidh anois go dtí Solidarity-People Before Profit.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The public are paying very substantial sums of money to enable businesses to keep going. There is a problem in that we still do not have a system of conditions for the kind of funds that are going to businesses, particularly conditions relating to Covid-19 compliance, to workers who can work from home being allowed to do so, and to how workers are being treated. Anybody who watches the twice weekly briefings from NPHE will repeatedly hear the call that workers should work from home. People should not be leaving their homes if they do not need to do so. There is a repeated and consistent call and it is absolutely necessary if we are to make this lockdown as effective as possible, which will enable us to make it as short as possible.

We all know from our own experience and from the statistics that the traffic volumes in this lockdown have not fallen by anywhere near as much as they did during the first lockdown. In Dublin the traffic volumes fell in the first lockdown by two thirds. This time round they have only fallen by slightly more than one third. The central reason for that is not about people making personal or social trips or anything like that, but is because people are being made, unnecessarily, to go to work. The problem is that the Government has done absolutely nothing about this.

I give an example of somebody who came to me. This has been reported in the newspapers today. An Post Insurance, which is based in Athlone, allowed all of its workers to work from home in the first lockdown, but in this third lockdown has forced dozens of workers to come

into work. These workers do not feel safe in work, which is why they contacted me, but they are forced to come into work nonetheless. The real problem is that there is no State authority with any power to do anything about this. This has been an issue now for almost a year. This company is in receipt of significant State money but there is nobody with the power to go in and inspect, to say that these workers should be working from home, to ask why the company is not allowing them to do so, and to say that if the company does not allow this it will be subject to a fine.

I wrote to the Health and Safety Authority, HSA, about this issue generally after many workers spoke to me and commented publicly on social media about the fact that they were not allowed now to work from home. The HSA said that it had no role in deciding whether a company is essential and, effectively, gave the same reply in respect of workers working from home. This is an incredible situation to be in almost a year after the start of the pandemic. The HSA and the unions need to be given the power to inspect workplaces and to fine employers who are not allowing workers to work from home who could be doing so. This scandal is putting the health and the lives of workers at risk. It is undermining our collective effort.

The other issue I wish to raise briefly is the plight of the DAA workers. I have raised it a number of times in the Dáil since the DAA, which receives significant public funds, attempted to use the coronavirus to impose so-called new ways of working which amount, for some workers, to an end of demarcation. These radical changes to workers' rosters are not in the interests of workers. When the craftworkers rejected that imposition and democratically voted against it, the company imposed an incredible 60% pay cut on them. The impact of that on the workers is devastating. One of them contacted me today to say that workers who are unable to pay their mortgages have been forced to give up their jobs as a consequence of the pay cut. This is a draconian approach by the company to try to ram through changes that have not been accepted by the workers and have been rejected democratically by them. It is really an attempt at bullying. As I said earlier, this company receives significant public funds. It should immediately withdraw this scandalous attack on workers, which amounts to a 40% pay cut and a reduction to 60% of wages and time, and withdraw its attempt at imposing so-called new ways of working.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Téimid ar ais go dtí an Rialtas anois agus glaoim ar an Teachta O'Connor.

Deputy James O'Connor: I welcome the decision to continue the enhanced rate of subsidy until the end of March 2021 to cover the current period of the public health restrictions. The enhanced subsidy is estimated to cost another €38 million per week, totalling €323 million by the end of March 2021. The EWSS, which has been a key component of the Government's response to the continued Covid-19 crisis, seeks to support viable firms and to encourage employment during these very challenging times. To date, subsidy payments of over €1.5 billion have been made and PRSI relief worth over €270 million has been granted to over 41,600 employers in respect of over 476,000 employees. The link is vital because it will ensure that when businesses are able to reopen, they will be able to do so quickly. There will be no cliff edge to the EWSS. It is noted that the legislation implementing the measures provided will be in place until 31 March 2021. This legislation also provides that the scheme may be extended until the end of June 2021, if required, and subject to certain procedural conditions.

I would like to take some time to speak about the implications for employees who are on the wage subsidy scheme. It is imperative that employers clearly outline to the businesses that are availing of the wage subsidy schemes that employees have the right to know that they are

getting paid because this has consequences for their ability to access credit. I know that many people who were in well-paid jobs before the pandemic cannot now avail of credit from the banks. The banks should be far more willing to engage with people who face these circumstances during this time, circumstances which have nothing to do with them. They should not be treated unfairly or punished for that reason. While I am aware that we do not want to engage in practices of unsustainable lending, the current level of discretion being shown by the banks on this issue is, quite frankly, cold. A far greater level of engagement and flexibility is required by the banks. I call on the Minister to continue to engage with them on this matter. People's lives should not be put on hold any more than is necessary because of this pandemic. The banks are a public service and they should treat the people as such.

This all comes down to the central message that the wage subsidy scheme has been an instrumental part of protecting our economy and many of our enterprises across the country. I ask that employers be honest with their employees. It is very important that there is transparency so that if employees are in receipt of the wage subsidy scheme, they are told about the implications of such by their employers if they are applying for credit or for a mortgage. This has been highlighted to me by a surprising number of people. It has had significant ramifications in many cases for people who have applied for a mortgage. I ask that the Minister might put some focus on this issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Are there any other Deputies to speak in the Government slot? No. Bogfaimid ar aghaidh. In the absence of Deputy Martin Browne, I call Deputy Shanahan.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The Regional Group certainly supports the extension of the scheme because we see it is as very important in providing liquidity and in softening costs on business owners. As a payroll support, we also see it as helping to keep up payments on social welfare contributions, which are very important for those looking at pension entitlements later in life.

On balance, the scheme is relatively straightforward. This seems to be the reaction of many businesses, although I would point out that Revenue can appear to be overbearing in both the process and the criteria. We have already heard about some of the people who have applied under the scheme. I wish to speak about a company which was 0.1% outside of the threshold, having claimed it. Revenue came back to look for the return of the full amount of moneys that had been subsidised. That is not a way to treat businesses which are quite challenged at the moment. They would not be looking for these schemes if they did not have liquidity and business problems. I ask that Revenue might take a little bit more of a sympathetic approach to people in that situation.

The EWSS is a support to payroll but it does not support other business costs. These have been spoken about previously. One cannot talk about softening payroll costs while ignoring all of the other costs that are building, particularly for businesses that are shut down at the present time. I am thinking of people who are still receiving bills for their rent, for leasing, for utilities and for insurance. This is another issue which the Government must do more about. We may need to look at the provision of some supports, if it is a case that we cannot soften the situation to some degree. Many people will be coming back to a reduced turnover and may be applying to this scheme, while others may be beneficiaries of the CRSS. Those people will have significant liabilities to face when they return to full business mode. It will be then that the full weight of State supports will be needed to endeavour to keep as many businesses viable and maintain

as many people in employment as possible. The scheme has also allowed employers to retain talent. It should not be forgotten that in many cases a good deal of time is spent in training new employees for a specific business after they have been taken on. Having this scheme in place has been very helpful, therefore, in securing and retaining talent until the business environment improves.

The Minister has left the Chamber, but the trajectory of business returns will not be a 90% straight up line. After this experience, many businesses are going to hiccup their way along. Potentially, they will be outside in respect of getting advanced turnover and unable to avail of support from the EWSS. Turnover, however, does not deliver profit. It is margin on turnover which delivers profit. This is again going to become very apparent in the next six to 12 months as businesses look to see if they are viable post-Covid-19 and to see what the demand curve will be like.

There is also going to be a weaning-off period. Once we give supports to businesses, especially in these straitened times, we cannot just come along and decide that what may be significant business supports are going to be cut in a certain month. There must be a period of downsizing over several months. Businesses also need transparency regarding the intentions of the Government and the Revenue Commissioners in this regard. I request that the Minister examine some form of graduated reduction in this context to secure business viability. Some other supports that will be needed, which have already been mentioned, include developments in respect of examinership light and the extension of the CRSS. Many service companies are not receiving CRSS support now, which I reiterate is vital, and yet those companies have these ongoing costs in respect of leasing, rent, etc. We must look more closely at supports in this area.

One other aspect concerning these schemes involves the warehousing of debts. Many companies availing of the EWSS may also have taken advantage of the ability to warehouse debt for value added tax, VAT. It is interesting, however, that one of the taxes which cannot be warehoused is corporation tax. Perhaps the Minister or someone in his Department could advise people about why that is the case. In addition, a year after warehousing debt, if it is necessary to arrive at a payment plan with the Revenue Commissioners, the rate of interest that will be applied is about 8% a year. It is penal to apply that rate of interest at a time when the State can borrow at negative interest rates. The Minister has some touching up to do but, on balance, this scheme is valuable and it is working well. We in the Regional Group are delighted to see it extended. We hope it will be extended for some time and that it will be downsized gradually as it ends.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: Thankfully, this scheme has helped many people during the financial hardship which the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has imposed on them. I raise issues in respect of two groups that have contacted me, and which believe the conditions of the scheme discriminate against. The first group consists of approximately 80 travel counsellors, most of whom have been refused access to the CRSS on the basis that the premises which they operate do not meet the eligibility criteria. I spoke to one such travel counsellor in my constituency office in recent days. That person started out as a self-employed travel counsellor some five and half years ago, in July 2015, and worked extremely hard to build the business from scratch. It grew year-on-year up until 13 March 2020, when everything came to a complete halt.

The business model of this endeavour has always been one of working from home to enable the provision of personal, one-to-one services to customers 24-7. The business is fully bonded and licensed by the Commission on Aviation Regulation, and its home office is a fully function-

al travel agency. That office has never been closed, the proprietor always keeps the landline and mobiles phone lines open to help clients. The clients of that travel counsellor who transferred or moved their holiday bookings from 2020 to 2021 are now again amending or cancelling their travel, leading to the processing of more refunds. Income on earnings in that business is down more than 100% since the start of the pandemic and there is no end in sight.

Travel counsellors are being refused access to the CRSS scheme because they do not have a shop front like travel agents. The reality, however, is that they have overheads in the same way as other businesses and their revenues have reduced to nothing. If these travel counsellors do not get the financial supports they need, they will not be in a position to return to operation when we get back to normal. Our tourism industry has been one of those hardest hit in this pandemic. Business in that sector has been almost completely wiped out. This area, however, will be one of the cornerstones of rebuilding our economy when we get to the post-Covid-19 era. I therefore ask the Minister to look at the case of these travel counsellors to see if they could be found to be eligible for the CRSS payment.

The other issue I raise, and which I have done several times previously, concerns track bookmakers. These are again a small group of people who have had no access to their places of business since March 2020. It looks like that will be the case as well for the foreseeable future. Track bookmakers again have no shop fronts. Most of them are independent operators who bought their stands at the various racecourses and, in most cases, they paid substantial amounts of money for them. These track bookmakers also have loans and liabilities connected with having access to their places of business. We all know people are not allowed into racecourses now and track bookmakers cannot operate their businesses. It will be that way for the foreseeable future. When we eventually get back to normality, these track bookmakers will be part of the horseracing scene. They bring great glamour to the occasion which is a day at the races. It will be a pity if this Covid-19 pandemic signalled the demise of the profession of track bookmaker. I request the Minister to examine this situation because track bookmakers cannot get access to their places of work and they have made fairly significant investments to set themselves up in this line of work.

Turning to the tourist bus area, €10 million was awarded to that sector last year. The funds were to be distributed by Tourism Ireland. It is much longer than six months now since that money was awarded to the tourism bus sector. A bus operator contacted me this morning and told me that none of that money has yet been distributed. Cash flow in these businesses is virtually at zero now. They welcomed the award of this money most gratefully in mid-summer last year but it is unforgivable that the money has not yet been distributed six months later. I ask the Minister to contact Tourism Ireland, find out why this money has not been distributed and get it done as soon as possible. I make that request because these businesses are starved of cash flow and are under great pressure as they face into a second very difficult year. It will be harder for these companies to survive this second year, so I ask the Minister to ensure that when money is allocated to different sectors that there is a strict timeframe for its distribution. It is unacceptable for that timeframe to be six months, as has been the case in the tourist bus sector, and this money must be distributed without delay.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We move on now to speakers from the Rural Independent Group. To clarify, are there two or three speakers?

Deputy Michael Collins: We have two speakers.

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I raise the issue of caravan and camping parks, which have been unfairly excluded by the Revenue Commissioners from the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS. As providers of seasonal accommodation, camping and caravan parks should be eligible for the scheme under the heading which covers hotels, bed and breakfasts, guesthouses and similar accommodation providers. In early December, the Revenue Commissioners updated the CRSS guidelines to exclude camping and caravan sites on the basis that they were operating outdoor activities and such outdoor activities are not ordinarily carried out from a business premises, as defined for the purposes of eligibility for the CRSS. This is incorrect because the situation is contrary to the understanding of the Revenue Commissioners and the operators believe that they should have been included within the remit of the scheme.

The Irish wedding industry is also in crisis. Its contribution to the economy is estimated to be a minimum of €2.3 billion per annum. Some 60% of those responding to a query in this regard estimated that they had lost more than 75% of their wedding business in 2020.

5 o'clock

Two thirds of the respondents had to lay off staff because of a loss of business. They need financial support for the industry for this year, and realistically for the first six months of 2022. Wedding services are not recognised as an industry and, as such, have been left off access to supports or industry forums, including the most recently announced Fáilte Ireland supports. Wedding services need to be recognised as a valuable industry. The Government needs to engage with them. These businesses make their living providing goods and services, venues and accommodation, food and beverages to the 21,000 weddings in Ireland each year, not to mention the 21,000 couples and their families who are now in limbo. These are couples and families who do not know when they can have the day they have spent so much time looking forward to and on which they are willing to spend so much money.

As I said in the House this morning on the issue of fuel poverty, the people who are in receipt of a pandemic unemployment payment should be included in the fuel allowance and not have to wait 15 months before they can apply.

People over the age of 66, the people who built Ireland and who continue to work, have been left with nothing, not one single brown cent. Nothing has been given to them aside from being told that they have to isolate. Nothing was given to this cohort of people, which is scandalous. These people worked hard. They are the people who got up early in the morning and who worked to put the country the way it is and who, unfortunately, have been left behind.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I offer my thanks and congratulations to the Minister of State, to the Department, to the social welfare people who are out there dealing with this, and to Revenue for this excellent scheme. It has provided very valuable funding for businesses that have grown over the years, which are businesses that give huge employment. I welcome that the scheme is extended to 31 March. I want to ensure, however, that we have reasonable debate in advance of that date to extend it further since we are not going to be out of this in any make, shape or form.

Other speakers have already mentioned the other sectors being neglected. The wedding services sector is a huge and valuable industry. One would not realise the amount that is in it. As Deputy Cahill has referred to, the bookmakers who do not have a bookmaker's office travel and have a stall, which they pay for. Some of them would have a stand at ten or 11 different courses. These people are also disallowed on the scheme. The people who are over the age of 66 are

being denied any scheme. Many of these are active business people with their own businesses, be it a bus, a van or a lorry. Just because it is parked beside their house and they do not have a rateable premises, they have been excluded from everything. They have not got a penny. They should definitely be supported. Consider also the travel agents or travel planners who may not have an office, or if they do it is in their own home. They too are denied access to the schemes.

There are a lot of anomalies and I am aware it is hard to get everyone, but one would think it could be tweaked. It is unforgivable, as the previous speaker has said, about the money from Fáilte Ireland for the bus hire. There are many people who do the bus transport for school runs with their own buses, and they are over the age of 66. They are not getting a shilling. It is appalling that there was €10 million for tourism sector supports and seven months later it has not been administered by Fáilte Ireland. What is going on? I am aware that people must work from home, which is difficult, but it is not fair to the people who need the money now. They needed it yesterday and they needed it six months ago. They must air and drive and keep their vehicles to keep them fit and ready for operation and to keep them running right. They need to get those supports. We need to try to support them and reach out to those businesses that are not getting funding. The people over the age of 66 would be a big cohort who are being denied everything. They do not get aon pingin amháin, which is a pity.

Deputy Martin Browne: Throughout the course of this pandemic the Government has made a habit of prolonging uncertainty for as long as it can. Since 6 January Sinn Féin has called for the existing rates of the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, to be extended to give workers some certainty, and for the supports that have been in place to continue. The Government, in its usual way, delayed and delayed in bringing this motion to us today. While we note this delay, we welcome that the existing rates of the EWSS will be extended until 31 March. This will provide much needed certainty for businesses and employees that they will continue to receive the supports at current rates.

Throughout the pandemic, Sinn Féin has campaigned purposefully for increased rates for low-paid workers and for the inclusion under the old temporary wage support scheme, TWSS, of women returning from maternity leave. We also argued for increased rates under the new EWSS when it was first introduced in September.

Another flaw in how the Government designed the scheme was in enabling the taxing of workers under the TWSS. This is because the Government decided to base the wage subsidy on net pay. This resulted in a double reduction for workers. When the new scheme was introduced, we rightly criticised it because it included cuts in wage supports for employers and employees and the removal of all wage supports for the lowest income workers. The pressure we in Sinn Féin applied to address this unjust reduction in supports resulted in the Government agreeing to increase those rates in October. The pressure we continue to apply has seen the Government reversing its decision to reduce these rates again. It must be noted, however, that the Government continues to leave out the lowest paid workers.

The EWSS is not the only issue that needs to be addressed for the sake of our workers and the businesses that are dealing with the prospect of prolonged restrictions and unemployment. Consideration must also be given to reviewing the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, scheme, because currently far too many businesses are excluded. In this context I am referring to the County Tipperary Chamber, and I ask that the Minister notes this. From the feedback the County Tipperary Chamber has received from its network, the CRSS is viewed as being too limited and excludes many businesses that have been directed to shut in the latest wave of re-

strictions. Non-essential retailers, for example, may receive assistance because of the closures but their suppliers do not. They point out that it is even more important for support schemes to be extended and expanded so that they are effective. They ask that if the CRSS scheme cannot be revised immediately, then new payments would be provided to support businesses that have been forced to close. The chamber warns that without this intervention, the growing debt burden experienced by businesses will likely trigger a wave of insolvencies and job losses that will permanently scar local economies nationally. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, to speak to our chambers of commerce and listen to the challenges that face every community out there, which are not necessarily represented in the confines of Departments.

By leaving matters to the last minute, the Government has little respect for the hard-pressed families and businesses concerned and it seems to be of the opinion that these businesses should be grateful that decisions are actually made. Similar delays are apparent across the sectors, including supports for the additional three weeks' parental leave, which remains unaddressed three months after the budget. Our student nurses and midwives have been left waiting for recognition for so long that Sinn Féin was forced to bring a motion to the House highlighting how student nurses and midwives have a right to be paid for the work that they do, especially since so many are working beyond their initial requirements. While the extension of the rates under the EWSS is welcome, there is much more to be done and the Government would be well advised to listen to workers and employees, to people who are unemployed, to families and all of the sectors who are having to deal with this crisis in their own individual ways.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The EWSS has been a real support for many workers and businesses throughout Covid. It is important to recognise that. I have three issues, however, that I will raise with the Minister of State, the first of which has been raised with me by a number of constituents. I have also raised this matter with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, previously. To avail of the scheme, the turnover of businesses must be less than 70% of previous turnover. What happens if a business has a turnover drop of 20% or 25% or 27%? Those businesses do not receive any assistance. I have suggested a tapering for this entitlement. If turnover, for example, is down by 20% why not give 50% of the EWSS payment to those businesses? I am aware that it would create extra paperwork but I am not asking for a whole series of new rates. Where there is a drop of 20%, there should be at least some payment. In most businesses a drop in turnover of 20% wipes out all of their profits.

There is a perverse incentive for businesses to operate in such a way as to reduce turnover by more than 30%. This is not an issue during level 5 restrictions, but during other levels when non-essential retail is open again, this perverse incentive is there. I ask the Minister to examine that again.

Second, under level 5 many businesses can be reasonably sure that their turnover will drop by 30% or more. However, there are some businesses, such as independently owned local retailers and so forth, that find it hard to forecast by how much their turnover will drop. I wrote to the Minister's office and the office responded by saying it is on an opt-in, opt-out basis, month by month, so businesses do not have to forecast, which would be impossible. I appreciate that. However, there is another issue. What happens if a business realises that its turnover dropped by more than 50% last month or in the previous month? I ask the Minister to put in place the same flexibility to allow business to claim retrospectively. I am not referring to last March or April, but at least for one, two or even three months whereby those businesses could claim retrospectively if there had been a sudden drop. That is not unreasonable.

The third issue has been raised by many Deputies. It is the issue of extra tax liability for recipients of EWSS. That is a very sore point for many workers. This tax is calculated on net pay, not gross pay. I raised this matter as far back as 20 May last with the Minister for Social Protection. I also raised it with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, on 28 May. I was told it will not be an issue for most workers and for those who would have to pay extra tax, the Revenue Commissioners would be very flexible and the tax would be minimal. I was made aware of a person working in a bakery, who has worked daily since last March. That person received a tax bill for €1,200 yesterday. The person received the normal wages since March and is now faced with this tax bill. Yes, the person has four years to pay it, but the person still must pay it. As we speak, that person is accruing further tax liability, week after week. This could continue for the next six months, so the person will receive another tax bill this time next year. Even if the person is given four years to repay it, there will be double payments for three years. If the Minister cannot change what has happened up to now in regard to the taxation of workers on EWSS, he can change what is happening now to ensure they will not be paying back for the first year what they owed for 2020 and then paying double payments for three years.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I welcome this debate and thank the 20 Deputies who contributed to it, covering a large number of issues. In the first instance, everybody recognises that the wage subsidy schemes, the earlier one and the current one, have been a central pillar of the Government's response to the economic impact of Covid-19 by supporting viable firms and encouraging employment. To that end, it is an important bridge between social welfare payments such as the pandemic unemployment payment and regular employment, which is the ultimate goal. To the maximum extent possible, the objective is to maintain a position where as many employees as possible who are currently on EWSS retain their link with their employers, rather than migrate to the pandemic unemployment payment and lose their connection with their employers as a result of going on a payment from the Department of Social Protection. As the restrictions are eased, the EWSS will also play an important role in getting people back to work, thereby reducing the numbers depending on the PUP.

I will mention some of the issues that were raised in this debate on the employment wage subsidy scheme. One was the difficulties relating to mortgages. It was interesting that early in the debate a Sinn Féin Member said there are people on the scheme who perhaps would prefer to go for redundancy after being on the scheme for so many months. A subsequent speaker from the same party said that people on the scheme were having difficulty getting mortgages. That shows the difficulties that arise with this issue. The Government's position recognises the difficulties. A third suggestion was made by Deputy O'Connor, that perhaps there should be an onus on employers to notify all their employees officially if they are claiming the EWSS.

Everybody wants to get support to get mortgage approval, but if people are in a company that has suffered a severe reduction in turnover there might or might not be a question regarding its future viability. I doubt anybody wishes to take on the debt of a large mortgage for the rest of his or her life unless he or she is quite sure he or she will be in a position to pay it when the pandemic has ended. While it is creating short-term difficulties, there could be a worse situation if people are given large mortgages and then find they have severe difficulties with those mortgages as a result of the employer not being in a position to maintain their employment in the long term. There is a balance to be struck here. I understand it is very difficult and it will certainly cause delays in people completing house and property purchases. There is no blanket ban or delay on mortgages. Each case is examined on a case-by-case basis, which is appropri-

ate. All mortgage applications should be examined in that way.

Other Deputies said this is a great scheme, that it should be part of the permanent landscape in Ireland and that it should be worked into short-time working arrangements, as may happen in other countries. Practically every Member welcomed the existence of the scheme, and spoke about its importance and the necessity for the scheme. They welcomed the extensions that are being made. The Minister made it clear that there will be no cliff edge situation with it coming to an abrupt end. People are looking for certainty about what will happen later in the year, but nobody can make any absolutely certain statements on how the Covid-19 pandemic will develop. Ultimately, until we have a vaccine there will be always significant issues.

Other Members mentioned the CRSS, which is not the subject of today's debate. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is examining a situation to help businesses that were not open to the public, such as the wholesale bottlers that were mentioned in the debate, and to see if some other arrangement can be made. There is a variety of other schemes, and that Department is examining that issue at present. I believe the issue of premises that pay rates will come into that. Businesses that were not open to the public and are suffering due to not being eligible for CRSS might have an opportunity to get into a new scheme.

I am sorry I do not have time to deal with all the issues that were raised. If Deputies wish to get further clarification, they should contact my office directly and I will be happy to get direct replies to them. As I said, more than 20 Members contributed to the debate and I thank them for their generally supportive comments. I am not able to address every query in the time available, but I will be happy to do so one-to-one if Deputies wish to contact me. I commend the order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2020 [Seanad]: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am sharing time with Deputy Connolly. The purpose of this Bill is to transpose EU Directive No. 2017/137, also known as the PIF directive. It will amend the 1994 and 2011 Criminal Justice Acts, the Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) Act 2001 and other enactments. In his opening speech last week the Minister of State, Deputy James Browne, told us that the European Commission has been on to Ireland already with a "reasoned opinion" because the transposition is overdue. The Minister of State said, "This reasoned opinion is the final step before Ireland can be referred to the European Court of Justice, ECJ, where a fine will be imposed." Is it not amazing that the Dáil's work schedule is being dictated by the threat of fines?

The PIF directive was issued on 5 July 2017 and some of its elements were already transposed into Irish legislation by way of the Criminal Justice (Corruption Offences) Act 2018. The directive's aim is to strengthen the systems for fighting crime affecting the EU budget, fraud, and other offences against the financial interests of the EU. The deadline for transposition of the PIF directive was 6 July 2019. The Bill before us today belatedly deals with the outstanding matters mentioned and also provides for the creation of a new offence of misappropriation.

As usual, the Oireachtas Library and Research Service produced a very useful Bill digest. The section on the policy background highlights that there are varying estimates of the cost or damage of fraud to the EU's budget annually. The European Anti-Fraud Office, OLAF, gives estimates of more than €500 million whereas there have been far higher estimates of up to €5 billion, including €1 billion in VAT fraud.

The PIF directive also provides for the new European Public Prosecutor's Office, EPPO. Under protocol 21, Ireland has opted out of participating in the EPPO for the time being. In January 2020, there was a regulatory impact analysis, RIA, on this Bill and two policy options were considered. One of the options was to introduce legislation and the other was, hilariously, to do nothing. The Bill digest states, "The RIA notes that the potential impact of doing nothing would include, 'costs to the State from the possible imposition of fines and potential reputation damage.'" The option to do nothing was only being considered six months after the deadline for transposition. We are already being fined for our tardiness regarding this EU directive, so the option of doing nothing is actually costing us money. How many times has the Cabinet sat around and said one of its options is do to nothing? I would say it happens quite often by the looks of things.

I often wonder what the Government is doing at all. There has been indecision around Covid-19 measures and roadmaps for reopening but no consideration of the preferred zero Covid approach and a full campaign around survivors accessing their testimonies to the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes without the Government telling any of us, or the survivors, that the recorded testimonies had been deleted. Years of Brexit negotiations and aspects of negotiations around fisheries do not seem to have been considered at all. It was up to the fishermen themselves to campaign and raise awareness. Why is it always up to the affected groups and sectors to raise the Government's consciousness on important matters? Why is it always the many fighting for their rights, their livelihoods and their safety? Why is the Government squandering much needed Exchequer funds paying EU fines? Surely the Minister of State would agree there are services and projects to serve the people that would be a much better use of that money. It seems the EU is the only one that is responded to in time as well.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Is iontach an rud é go bhfuil 20 nóiméad againn don Bhille seo. Tá sé ráite ag an Rialtas gur rud teicniúil é agus in ainneoin sin tá 20 nóiméad ann. Níos luaithe inniu bhí dhá nóiméad agam maidir le hábhar thar a bheith tábhachtach agus ní rud teicniúil a bhí ansin, sé sin, cumhachtaí an tOmbudsman do Leanaí. Glacaim leis an am go fonnmhar.

It is ironic that our group has 20 minutes to speak on a Bill that is described as technical and had five minutes for the motion on the Ombudsman for Children earlier, on which I would like to have expanded. I would have given my left arm for ten minutes on the Ombudsman's report or tomorrow's debate on mental illness. It is not the Minister of State's fault but it is interesting to put it in context. We have a full 20 minutes on a Bill that he has described as technical. I thank him for his written speech and the background to it. I also thank the Library and Research Service and gabhaim buíochas do Rannóg an Aistriúcháin as an ngluais a thug siad dúinn ionas go mbeadh muid in ann cúpla focal a rá trí Ghaeilge. Seo rud nua agus ba mhaith liom aitheantas a thabhairt don aistriúchán. Is éilliú gníomhach agus cionta éagsúla atáimid ag caint faoi anseo.

What can we do but welcome the Bill? I absolutely welcome a Bill that deals with corruption and fraud and creates new offences but, as my colleague said, this should have been done

a long time ago. In fact, today is D-day, the day by which the Government was to reply to the Commission, so it is doubly ironic that we are here today. This should have been done before last July. The Bill digest makes for difficult reading. There was a “do nothing” scenario or one where we do something and doing nothing means we get a bad reputation and have to pay many fines. It raises the question of how we ended up having so much time, in the middle of a pandemic, to discuss a Bill that is technical and that should have gone through the Dáil nearly a year ago. How could that happen when this time should be used for the pandemic emergency? There are so many topics on which we would like to speak, to keep the Government on its toes and to make life easier for everybody, and here we are discussing a technical Bill. I acknowledge the work that went into it but it was belated and too late.

The Bill includes an expanded definition of fraud and a new offence of misappropriation. There is also provision for the liability arising from the offences of a corporate body. That is to be welcomed, although I am not sure how extensive it is. It will have to be monitored carefully. It also defines the scope of the European Public Prosecutor’s Office, of which we are not a part. I do not know if the Minister of State will get a chance to speak on this again but I ask him to clarify the nature of our co-operation with that office. We did not opt into that section, and rightly so because we have a completely different legal system and it provides for an extension of European law into criminal law which is new and is a creeping jurisdiction. We have to be very careful. The directive allows for a European public prosecutor. How are we going to co-operate with that? What is the nature of our co-operation? Who will monitor the supra-national aspect? The prosecutor will be able to take action now in each country. I do not know whether it is good or bad, but I have concerns about the nature of our co-operation on something like that.

The extent of the fraud and corruption involved is anybody’s guess. The Library and Research Service tells us there are two estimates, from the Commission’s own estimate of €404 million to the House of Lords’, which is €5 billion. We were very grateful to the House of Lords lately for its attitude to certain aspects of Brexit and we should be grateful to it again as it is telling us that its estimate is at the very least €5 billion and that that is only the tip of the iceberg. That is interesting in itself.

I will move on to the report by the Department of Justice’s review group on corruption in Ireland. It would be nice to know when we are going to have a discussion on that. Perhaps the Minister of State could come back with a clarification on why this directive was not transposed in time. Are we facing any fines and what is the extent of our co-operation with this office that transcends and crosses borders?

The Department of Justice published a review group report on structures and strategies to prevent, investigate and penalise economic crime and corruption. We are talking about Ireland here. It is a very interesting report. There are about 122 pages if one leaves out the appendices. The foreword is very interesting because it is written by James Hamilton, the former Director of Public Prosecutions. It is dated 9 November 2020. It states, “The Review Group was established as part of a package of measures to enhance Ireland’s ability to combat economic crime.” It uses the term “economic crime” in order to have a broader view of crime and corruption which would include social welfare. To me, social welfare is way down as regards crimes but the term “economic crime” includes it. The foreword further states, “The Report identifies a number of strengths and weaknesses in the existing structures for dealing with economic crime and corruption [in Ireland]”. We are putting through legislation to deal with corruption related to the use or misuse of funds in regard to VAT returns for Europe, all the while ignoring the re-

view which has been available since last November. I appreciate that there is a pandemic. The review report outlines many weaknesses dating back years in regard to gaps and what should be done in Ireland. On the positive side, it states that the principal agencies charged with the investigation and prosecution of crime function well given the limitations imposed by their resources which in some cases, in particular in the case of the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau, are inadequate to meet existing demands as well as increasing demands which will arise in the future and that we need a more structured and co-ordinated approach. It goes on to say that there has been a continuing failure to legislate for the area of pretrial criminal procedures as recommended by the Fennelly commission report of 2003.

The review report sets out the recommendations, including legislative, structural and resourcing measures needed to enhance agency and multi-agency prevention and enforcement capabilities in the sphere of economic crime. The Minister of State will be aware of the following point, but while I have time I am going to use it. To put it in context, Ireland, a relatively small country with a population approaching 5 million, is the fifth largest provider of wholesale financial services in the EU, with more than 400 international financial institutions located here. According to EUROSTAT figures, Ireland has the fifth largest proportion of workers in the financial services and insurance activity sectors at approximately 95,000, and so on. What is the point being made? The vulnerability of the financial services sector to economic crime and corruption cannot be over-emphasised. I am referring to the foreword of the review report before it gets into the gaps and the recommendations. This report was complete at the time the pandemic struck Ireland. It goes on to speak about the increase in online activities. It needs hardly to be emphasised that all of this increases the opportunities for cyber criminals and the risk of computer crime and so on.

Promises were made to deal with white-collar crime in Ireland but nothing much has happened in relation to it. I am saying that. The purpose of the review is to examine specifically anti-fraud and anti-corruption structures and procedures in the criminal law enforcement. It goes on to make 25 recommendations. It highlights the inadequacies in many areas, including in regard to Standards in Public Office, SIPO, which has a bearing on all of our lives. The review group recommends that the independence and the capacity of SIPO be enhanced by ensuring that resources allocated to the ombudsman under Vote 19 are ring-fenced. The rationale behind this recommendation is that improving resourcing to SIPO will enable it to fulfil its mandate. The review goes on to speak about the gap whereby former Members cannot be investigated, the need for Irish competition to be amended to create a specific offence of bid rigging and the lacuna in the Ethics in Public Office Act 1995. Currently, there are no provisions for examining possible contraventions of the ethics Act by ex-Members of the Oireachtas who are not officeholders.

I do not know if the Minister of State has read the review report. I do not expect Ministers and Ministers of State to have read everything. I am working my way through the review report. No more than the mother and baby home report of 3,000 pages, it is a work in progress. It is ironic that we are here putting through this legislation while, as I said earlier, we have this report. I have three minutes remaining which I am prepared to give to the Minister of State if there is not provision for him to come back in later in order that he can tell me if the Department has looked at the review and what is being done in relation to the recommendations that are so urgent, some of which have been around for a long time. I have mentioned the legislation of 2003 and SIPO. In between, there is a variety of recommendations that could be implemented very quickly if we were seriously interested in tackling corruption and fraud in Ireland and in

Europe but very often we resort to the lowest hanging fruit as in the case of social welfare.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I welcome this Bill. I disagree with white-collar crime but I do not believe this legislation will make any difference. Ten years ago, the Government bailed out the banks at a cost of €64 billion. According to the Comptroller and Auditor General, this continues to cost us €3 million per week. To put this in context, the pandemic unemployment payment, which the Government has continuously tried to cut on the basis that we cannot afford it, has cost us €5 billion. I believe that if there was another banking crisis tomorrow and we had available to us the evidence we had in regard to what happened in the first crisis those involved would again get off scot-free and nobody would be prosecuted. In January, a mother in Cork who was caught shoplifting was sentenced to four months in prison while others such as bankers, developers and speculators scammed this State out of a fortune and robbed the future of many of us, our children and future generations and got away scot-free. It is beyond belief.

Nothing has changed. Since this Government came to power it has been plagued by scandal after scandal. Developers and big business are still top priority for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. There is not a Deputy in this Chamber who does not know what happened when the banks had the ear of Government. Every day, I speak to people who have been harmed. Yet again, it appears developers have the ear of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. He is proceeding with a shared equity scheme despite his departmental officials telling him that the only people who will benefit from it are developers. Has this Government learned nothing down through the years?

We are one year on from a momentous election in which people came out in their droves to vote for change. They wanted change and they voted for it. They voted for an end to parties that the rich and powerful can influence. They voted to end the bank bail-outs and developer hand-outs. What we have seen in the last 12 months, shows Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will never change. There needs to be real opposition to hold them to account. The money wasted and exposed almost weekly is a scandal. This is not change. It is more of the same. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have never held each other to account. Sinn Féin will not let them away with that. We will hold the Government parties to account.

I share the frustrations of Deputy Connolly in regard to the allocation of speaking time. Earlier today I wanted to raise a serious issue with the Taoiseach. On five occasions I have asked the Taoiseach in this House about the closure of SouthDoc in Blackpool in Cork. This evening, we are discussing fraud and crime. SouthDoc is paid €7.3 million per annum to provide an out-of-hours GP service for the people of Cork North Central and Kerry. It has not provided that service since last March. I have asked the Taoiseach, the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, the Department of Health, the HSE and SouthDoc why when we are paying €7.3 million for a service the people of Cork North Central are not getting that service. This is happening during the time of a pandemic. A number of weeks ago, a man had to walk from Farranree, on one side of Cork city, out to the SouthDoc facility on Kinsale Road because he did not have the money for a taxi and he was too afraid to get a bus because of the number of people testing positive for Covid at the time. That is some distance. I spoke to a woman with a disabled son and two other children who had to leave her home in Blarney, drive past the SouthDoc building in Blackpool, which should be open but is closed, and out to the SouthDoc premises on Kinsale Road. She had to wait there for 40 minutes with her children because her husband was at work. This debate is about fraud and white-collar crime. What the SouthDoc service is doing in Cork is wrong and it is in breach of its service level agreement. Something needs to be done about it.

As I said, this debate is about crime and particular technicalities, but I have outlined the real facts about what is happening for people in this country. I hope they will be dealt with for once and for all. The SouthDoc facility in Blackpool was closed last March. For 11 months, the State has paid for a service that is not available. That is fraud.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am very glad to have an opportunity to speak in the debate on the Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2020. I acknowledge that it is a very technical Bill. As with a number of other Bills we have dealt with, it is concerned with updating our infrastructure to deal with international crime and make sure we are following EU directives. That is all absolutely necessary and is to be supported. I agree with the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, when she spoke earlier, that there are jurisdictional questions that need to be dealt with. I would like to see some detail in that regard and in terms of the outworkings. In the generality, however, all of us would be in support of ensuring that we have the infrastructure and the ability to deal with European-wide and international crime, particularly fraud offences and cyber-related crime.

In recent times, particularly during the Covid pandemic, we have all been inundated with text messages, WhatsApp messages and Messenger messages promising us this, that and the other. Most of us know - if we do not, it is brought to our attention very quickly by Joe Duffy and others - that such messages are generally come-ons by fraud enterprises. We all must be on the ball all the time in that regard. As much as one sometimes sees these things and laughs at them, one finds that there are people who fall for them. The people who operate the frauds do so on the basis that it is worth their while. Sometimes they put people who are already in fairly precarious scenarios into even worse monetary situations. That level of organised crime needs to be dealt with. Whatever level of infrastructure we require to do it needs to be provided. In that sense, I completely support the legislation.

On the wider issues, I have spoken previously about the need to ensure we have all the tools we need to deal with the times in which we find ourselves in terms of cybersecurity. There are difficulties and questions to be answered as to whether there will be one overall body to deal with this and what the relationship will be between it and the Garda and the Defence Forces. We are talking about an issue that crosses many planes. We have spoken about straightforward crime and the fact that we have a tax on our communications infrastructure. We know that some of these crimes impact on business, whether they are literally fraud or denial of service attacks, which put a business out of operation for a period of time and have an impact monetarily and in terms of how the world perceives that business. These issues are incredibly important. As I said, we need to ensure we have the required specialist capacity and ability, specialist training and specialist personnel. There are questions to be answered as to whether such personnel will have to be seconded to the cybersecurity body or whether there will be a crossover between the Defence Forces and the Garda, especially when we are dealing with issues to do with cyber-crime as it relates to national security. I do not always enjoy using the term “national security” but we need to get some level of information in that regard.

In regard to communications infrastructure and the broadband network, people say to me quite often, as I assume is the case with other Deputies, that the lack of broadband provision in certain areas amounts to a crime. In fairness, I welcome the indication by the Tánaiste that he, the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and others are engaging with National Broadband Ireland, Eir and other bodies with a view not only to speeding up the roll-out of the national broadband plan but also to improving Internet connectivity in general. I commend the Commission for Communications Regulation, Com-

Reg, in this regard. An issue was brought to me by a company in Deputy Gould's constituency regarding antennas that were useful in being able to provide broadband provision using mobile telephone services. Their use was found technically to be in breach of legislation but through engagement with the communications committee and my interaction with ComReg, the latter has come up with a solution to the matter. That may be beneficial to many people and is to be welcomed. It would be remiss of me not to mention this issue when we are talking about the realities of cybersecurity and ensuring our infrastructure is sound. We all know the difficulties in this regard and that there are wider issues to address. There is talk that a new electoral commission will have to look at particular questions relating to the impact of social media on the outcome of elections. There are the microanalytics and all the various toolsets that we are now aware of and the impact they may already have had on particular referendums and elections. There is a wide body of work to be done in regard to our communications infrastructure, cybercrime and the regulations we need for the new world we have in terms of social media.

As we are talking about crime, I could not let the moment pass without dealing with some of the traditional elements of crime that are still with us. I have talked before about the drugs pandemic. It is one that will be with us when we are beyond this particular and tragic Covid-19 situation. In fairness to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy James Browne, I have welcomed a number of speeches they have made and their commentary on the need to deal with these issues in a holistic sense. A whole-of-government response is required. It must be a cross-departmental effort, involving the Departments of Justice, Health, Education, and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Everybody accepts that. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, facilitated me in having a conversation with Vivian Guerin in regard to the scoping exercise he is carrying out into crime in Drogheda. I also spoke to Mr. Guerin about the need to look at the situation in the entire county of Louth. We know about the interaction of criminal gangs across the board, particularly in Dublin, and the particular scenarios that have arisen in that regard. There is an acceptance that the set of rules, tools or skills that are needed to deal with the drugs pandemic should be capable of operating across the board. We will not be able to separate out particular areas and we need to, for want of a better term, attack everywhere at the same time.

I welcome the plan for a Citizens' Assembly on crime. We need to set a date, accepting the difficulties with regard to the pandemic at this point. It is vital that we take the conversation outside of politics, this place and Leinster House and put it out to the people. We should look at best practice throughout the world. We need to deal with what we need from a health-led response, combined with the absolute necessity of a police or Garda response to criminal gangs and criminal elements.

I have spoken many times, as have others, about the fact that, across the board, but especially in working class areas, people have to deal consistently and constantly with drug debt intimidation. It has become day-to-day business for certain people and a day-to-day nightmare for a significant number of people. People often come to us or to other people who work in the community about this. They use a drug dealer's first name and say they are going around to a person's place. I do not want to use an actual name because, in fairness, if I were to use one or two names people would know exactly who I am talking about. These people are better known than I am. The person will say to me he is going around to do a deal with X to ensure X does not attack his house or the houses of his son, daughter, grandson or granddaughter. This is what we are dealing with across the board and we need to deal with this in a full-scale way.

I have said this to the Minister previously. I have no difficulty with the person who becomes

absolute lead in this. At this point, in my head and on the basis of the conversations I have had with the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, it is her responsibility. Obviously, there is an element that involves the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, who is responsible as regards drugs. This issue needs to be consistently and constantly brought to Cabinet. Someone has to take the lead in dealing with this issue, even in the middle of the pandemic.

Luckily, we have seen incredible work by An Garda Síochána at local and State level. We have seen significant moves made against criminal gangs, and that is all positive. We know that sometimes it is a drop in the ocean. We all look at court appearances and we are aware of the situation. Senior gardaí say this as well. There is a roundabout scenario where there are addicts who are on the hook for drug debts. They end up going out and possibly burning down someone's house or inflicting or threatening violence for the main drug dealer. The main dealer is not especially concerned since he has a disposable fool to do it, for the want of a better term. That person will end up getting arrested and put back in the system. That is absolutely necessary. In some cases, this occurs for lesser crimes. The problem is that person may want to get services, may need services or may need rehabilitation. The gardaí will tell anyone those services are not in place. I know the chief superintendent in County Louth, Christy Mangan, has said many times that we are going to lose a generation to cocaine. He has been quoted in here and in many newspapers.

We need to give the drugs issue importance and put it front and centre. It needs to be at Cabinet level. As I have said, I welcome what I am hearing in the narrative and in the conversation pieces from the Minister in respect of this. We need to see action and a plan. At this point, we also need a timeline in respect of the citizens' assembly and dealing with the drugs crisis.

There are many other issues, for example, the housing crisis. We also know of many communities where the problem of minor crime can have more of an impact on the lives of people. This arises especially where we are dealing with dysfunctional families and people who need supports because, as a state, we have failed to put in place the supports and have allowed situations to fester. Two things happen. We fail a generation and this impacts on the people who live with these circumstances as well. I am calling for a review in respect of the powers and supports that can be brought into play. The local authority has a part to play but we need to resource services such as the HSE, Tusla and youth justice services that are fit for purpose. In fairness, the Minister has mentioned many times that we need to deal with the grooming of young people into criminal gangs.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Connor is next. I will be interrupting the Deputy at 6 p.m. to move the adjournment.

Deputy James O'Connor: Deputy Cahill is unable to attend, but he was down to share time with me.

I have to respond to some of the extraordinary words that were uttered not by the previous Sinn Féin speaker but the one before. The Deputy came in and lectured Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on their roles in the economic crisis, bank guarantee and bank bailout. There were all sorts of anti-European utterances about our role in the European Union. I wish to outline to the Deputy that when I was a child in primary school, Sinn Féin Deputies were in the Dáil praising the bank guarantee. Multiple Sinn Féin Deputies were in the Dáil Chamber, including Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, Arthur Morgan - as well as Deputy Pearse Doherty, while he was in the Seanad - giving support to the credit guarantee when it was being outlined and to the early

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stages of the bail out. The misinformation that was outlined by Deputy Gould when he was in the Chamber some moments ago is extraordinary. I believe he owes the House a more honest account of the role of Sinn Féin.

I will move on now to speak not about constituency issues or anything else but about the matter at hand in the Dáil, which is the Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2020. The Government is working on significant legislation in terms of our role to protect ourselves from fraud at European level. We should acknowledge the fact that fraud is estimated to cost €500 million worth of European money. Obviously, that is a staggering amount of money and we should do more on a multilateral basis to deal with that. It requires high levels of co-operation from our Government and across all European levels to police this matter. It is an extraordinarily large amount of money that could be put to exceptionally good use in other areas. It could be used to prevent crime, for example, or to help us to upgrade and invest in cybersecurity, as outlined by the previous speaker. That is an exceptionally important point. I believe our ability to protect ourselves from cybercrime is an area where we are exceptionally vulnerable in Ireland.

We are a prominent nation in terms of international finance and banking. We need to look no further than outside the door today in terms of the companies and multinationals that surround us at the Convention Centre. From my engagement with people in these sectors as a member of the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Networks it is clear that strong views are being put forward by many people in that sector. They are concerned about the ability of the Government to defend the sectors from cyberattacks. Unfortunately, this can be serious in the impact it can have on the public finances and potential theft. We should strengthen our ability to police against that. This has been outlined by multiple Deputies in the House today.

I wish to put this point across to the Minister of State, Deputy Browne, today while he is with us, because I know this matter falls within his Department. It relates to how we police fraud and theft in Ireland. Fraud and theft are obviously issues we have had down through the years. This has been experienced through multiple Governments and we have to do more. I would like to see Ireland rise in the index in terms of our transparency, which is obviously important.

As a new person getting involved in politics, I often sense among the public a great mistrust of public representatives, of what they stand for or of what they are trying to achieve by going into politics. This applies whether it is delivering for constituencies or working on policy issues that affect everyone in the State. This is an area where members of the public want to see us leading from the front. They want to see a more honest and transparent political system. Our ever-growing role within the European Union is obviously becoming more important. It is growing each year in terms of the integration between nations across the European Union. This is timely legislation. It is time we put our shoulders to the wheel and enacted it.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 6 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Thursday, 4 February 2021.