



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 18 Feabhra 2021

Thursday, 18 February 2021

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Covid-19 (Drug and Alcohol Services, and Homelessness): Statements

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, who will share time with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I welcome this opportunity to update the House on drug and alcohol services and health supports for people who are homeless during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Not everyone faces the same risk from Covid-19. People who use drugs or alcohol in a problematic way are at heightened risk due to underlying health and social factors. These are compounded for people who are homeless, who experience multiple morbidity and are at risk of premature death. There can also be risks associated with the consumption of illicit drugs or large quantities of alcohol. In particular, the ageing cohort of opioid users are vulnerable to Covid-19 because of a high level of pre-existing health problems and lifestyle factors. It is estimated that 19,000 people with opioid dependency and 4,500 single people are homeless, with a significant overlap between these two groups. The Department of Health and the HSE have prioritised these groups in our response to Covid-19.

The incidence of Covid-19 among people living with addiction and in homelessness has remained low during the third wave of the pandemic. Health Protection Surveillance Centre, HPSC, data for the period from late-November to mid-February show that, in addiction services, there have been nine outbreaks of Covid-19 involving 48 cases. Of these cases, three people have been hospitalised and, unfortunately, one person has died, which is most regrettable. In homeless services, there have been a further nine outbreaks involving 41 cases. Of these, two people have been hospitalised. These figures include staff in homeless services. By comparison, there were 3,076 outbreaks of Covid-19 nationally, while in residential institutions there were 186 outbreaks with 1,308 associated cases.

It is clear from the data that the impact of Covid-19 on people in addiction or homelessness has been much less than expected. This low incidence has been achieved by the actions of

health and social care services, which prioritised these groups in terms of protection, detection and case management. These services are saving lives, perhaps not in hospitals, but by ensuring that people with underlying health conditions do not end up in intensive care in the first place.

What have we done during Covid-19 to achieve this positive outcome? What are the lessons we can draw for health policy? I wish to highlight three positive lessons. First, we have seen significant improvements in HSE addiction services during Covid-19. Specific measures were developed to ensure that all people in receipt of opioid substitution treatment could continue safely on the treatment during the pandemic, and that anyone who required opioid substitution treatment would receive it. Not alone did the existing 10,000 patients continue in opioid substitution treatment throughout the pandemic, but an additional 900 people were brought into treatment in the past year, an increase of more than 8%. Many of these new recruits have chaotic lives, including up to 100 who are rough sleepers or homeless.

Additional supplies of naloxone were also provided during Covid-19 to minimise the risk of drug overdose, and an awareness campaign was put in place in conjunction with the Union for Improved Services, Communication and Education, UISCE, the voluntary organisation representing service users. The Department of Health is providing an additional €4.2 million in 2021 to retain the specific actions taken to support increased access to opioid substitution treatment during Covid-19. I am delighted the gains that have been achieved in the crisis are now being mainstreamed within the HSE health services.

Second, I highlight the exceptional measures put in place to protect and support homeless people. The HSE appointed a dedicated team, including a clinical lead, to co-ordinate the Covid-19 homeless response for the large cohort of single homeless people in Dublin. The purpose of the team is to intensify the health supports provided to homeless people during Covid-19. I will share some headline figures from the team. A total 282 medically vulnerable homeless individuals are being supported in shielding facilities. A further 1,000 homeless service users in private temporary accommodation are receiving significant health supports. Sixty-five Covid-positive homeless users are in self-isolation facilities with another 105 service users who are suspect or close contact cases. Fifty-two staff members in homeless services who are Covid-positive have been supported since December, and up to 100 rough sleepers and homeless people have been put on opioid substitution treatment, OST.

In July last year, I, together with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, met with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to agree how dedicated funding and resources could be provided to deliver the necessary health and mental health supports required to assist homeless people with complex needs. I have made the health needs of homeless persons a key priority. The HSE winter plan is the first step in increasing funding for targeted health interventions for people who are homeless and in addiction. The Department of Health provided an additional funding of €5.5 million to meet the following objectives: continue the protective help measures for the medically vulnerable homeless population; expand GP services for people living in emergency accommodation in Dublin and regional centres; and provide continuity of care for homeless people requiring emergency hospital treatment. In budget 2021, the Government provided €11 million to extend these measures for the full year.

Further initiatives to meet the health needs of homeless people are also being funded, including a specialist mental health outreach team. More resources are only one component of the policy response, however. The other element is a co-ordinated approach to the complex health and social needs of homeless people between the HSE, the Dublin Region Homeless

Executive, DRHE, and voluntary homeless and drug and alcohol services.

The third lesson I wish to highlight is the development of a long-term and sustainable response to chronic homelessness and rough sleeping. The Department of Health and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage have prioritised a housing-led approach, with a vision of housing together with integrated wrap-around health and tenancy supports to assist people in maintaining a tenancy and improving physical and mental health. Since the start of the pandemic, additional Housing First tenancies have been established for individuals who had been sleeping rough or had been long-term users of emergency accommodation. A total of 208 tenancies were established in 2020. I am informed that altogether, 1,006 single persons exited emergency accommodation into homes in 2020 in the Dublin region. The Department of Health has provided an additional €1.125 million to provide health supports for 218 new tenancies under the Housing First programme in 2021. This will help achieve the national target for Housing First of 663 tenancies to be delivered by the end of the year.

The need for drug and alcohol services extends across the population. Problem drug and alcohol use is a societal issue that continues during a pandemic and, in some circumstances, can get worse as people struggle with lockdown. To better understand the impact of Covid-19 on drug and alcohol services, the Department of Health undertook a rapid assessment, involving an online survey of services, case studies and analysis of European data on drug use. The initial findings of this assessment were presented to the national oversight committee for the national drugs strategy, which I chair. They highlight how drug and alcohol services have been curtailed but have adapted to new ways of working to continue to support people affected by substance misuse.

As part of the Government plan for living with Covid-19, the Department of Health has developed a framework to support the restoration and continuation of drug and alcohol services in a planned and appropriate manner in line with public health advice. Officials worked with drug and alcohol service providers to identify the guidance and supports needed. To support these essential services, I approved additional funding of €480,000. I recognise the vital role played by the drug and alcohol support groups and treatment programmes in reducing the harm of substance abuse and in supporting rehabilitation.

I advocate a targeted campaign to reach vulnerable groups that otherwise may not have equal access to the vaccine. Listening to and engaging with vulnerable groups are critical to building confidence in the Covid-19 vaccination programme. This will take time, resources, targeted communications and innovative delivery mechanisms. In particular, a collaborative approach to roll out the vaccine with the HSE addiction and inclusion health services, section 39 organisations and service users is required. While considering the vaccine allocation strategy for vulnerable groups, we must be aware that this is contingent on the supply of the vaccine into the country.

Covid-19 has brought into focus the health inequalities faced by people who are homeless and in addiction. I hope that Deputies have an understanding of the measures we have put in place to protect these groups, not just from Covid-19, but to enhance their health status on a long-term basis. The experience of Covid-19 has reinforced the need to treat drug and alcohol misuse as a public health issue. The national drug strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, provides the roadmap to a health-led approach to drug and alcohol misuse. I am overseeing a mid-term review of the strategy, which builds on the many innovative measures developed during Covid-19. I look forward to hearing the contributions of Deputies on these matters.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Members for allowing me time today to highlight the specific actions being taken to address the mental health needs of people experiencing homelessness and of individuals with a dual diagnosis of addiction and mental health difficulties. Covid-19 has posed significant challenges across society, including increased stress, anxiety and fear, not least for these particular groups of individuals. It is well evidenced that homelessness can be both a cause and a consequence of mental health problems. Similarly, drug and alcohol misuse frequently co-exist with mental health difficulties.

Sharing the Vision, our new national mental health policy, recognises that both individuals experiencing homelessness and people with a dual diagnosis should have access to appropriate mental health services and supports by addressing existing service gaps and developing stepped, integrated models of care. With respect to dual diagnosis, the policy is transformative in that it reverses a problematic policy recommendation set out in *A Vision for Change* in 2006. For individuals with a dual diagnosis, it will no longer be necessary to establish whether a mental health difficulty is the primary issue to access the support of a community mental health team. On this basis, the policy recommends a tiered model of integrated service provision for people with a dual diagnosis to ensure clear care pathways and improved outcomes for individuals and their families.

The work of the national implementation and monitoring committee on Sharing the Vision is progressing since its establishment late last year. The committee is tasked with driving and overseeing implementation of the policy's recommendations, including those relating to dual diagnosis and homelessness. Of the additional €50 million allocated to mental health in budget 2021, €23 million is dedicated to commencing implementation of many of the short-term recommendations in Sharing the Vision. This includes the expansion of the clinical care programme for dual diagnosis. To date, a draft model of care for dual diagnosis has been developed, based on international best practice and the experience of the national working group. It takes account of service user views and describes the clinical care pathway for individuals, with integration across primary care, substance misuse, community mental health and acute services. Significant progress has been made on the recruitment of a national clinical lead and programme manager for dual diagnosis. Successful applicants have been identified for both posts and have accepted the roles. Start dates are being negotiated. Once these two key posts are in place, a multidisciplinary steering working group will be established to finalise the model of care and will identify pilot sites to commence the programme.

Mental health development funding will also be available this year to enhance specialist mental health services for people who are homeless. This includes the appointment of a consultant in the north Dublin homeless mental health service following recent approval of the post. Similar plans are in place for the south Dublin homeless mental health service. There are two specialist community mental health teams in Dublin for people who are homeless and experiencing severe or complex mental health issues. People experiencing homelessness can also access general community mental health teams and mental health supports within the primary care sector. A range of dedicated mental health supports for people who are homeless are also delivered through HSE-funded community and voluntary groups, including Safetynet, Merchants Quay Ireland and Dublin Simon Community. More broadly, mental health services and supports will be improved through Sharing the Vision implementation structures for people experiencing homelessness across a broad continuum of supports. This includes mental health promotion, prevention, primary intervention and specialist mental health assertive outreach

teams in addition to housing, education and employment supports to enhance social inclusion and recovery.

It is essential that a cross-sectoral approach is taken, including between social inclusion and mental health, to ensure the mental health needs of these groups are met. The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, and I are fully committed to the continued development of mental health services and supports and ensuring access and appropriate care for particular groups of individuals, including those experiencing homelessness and people with a dual diagnosis.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I want to express my disappointment at the title of these statements and questions and answers. Addiction services and homelessness are two issues and are often intertwined but we must recognise that these are two separate issues. Those in active addiction or in need of addiction services are not always homeless. *Vice versa*, homeless people are not always in active addiction. To say otherwise shows a complete lack of understanding and it is about time this Government stopped insulting some of the most vulnerable in our society. I have a number of questions and I want to give the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, some time at the end of my section to answer. If he does not have the time to respond to all of them, he might respond in writing.

What public health measures is the Minister of State taking to warn vulnerable adults and children of the harms associated with gambling? There has never been a State-funded public health awareness, education or harm prevention campaign on gambling in Ireland. It is urgently needed and we see from data from the European school survey that Irish males aged between 15 and 16-years old have more than double the problem gambling rate of the general population. The Minister of State knows my feelings on gambling addiction. It is about time this was addressed and, while the Minister of State may be quick to claim that he has no responsibility for gambling and that it falls under the remit of the Minister for Justice, we both know this is wrong and that gambling addiction should be the Minister of State's responsibility.

On the national drugs strategy, when is the mid-term review to be published? Will this look at the impact of Covid-19 on addiction services? Of the 50 actions due to be finished by 2020, will those that have not been completed or started be prioritised or will the Minister of State confirm if new actions will replace them? To be clear, the last data from 2019 show that only four of the 50 actions had been completed. The drugs trade terrorises and stigmatises communities. The national drugs strategy overlooked the fear, intimidation and violence that goes with this. It has become deep-rooted in some of our local communities. Will the revised actions include a strong commitment to putting in place the much-needed long-term and sustainable initiatives that will be required to address these problems? Communities are suffering and they need the Minister of State's support.

What response is being planned to address the challenges in providing addiction services in rural areas and the significant additional challenge of rural isolation and its impact on problem drug and alcohol use? One hundred and nine beds have been shut in residential rehabilitation services since November 2019. The HSE claims this is due to Covid-19 public health measures. However, I know that some of these beds will never reopen. Can the Minister of State give a commitment to restoring these beds or replacing them, and the timeline for this restoration? In budget 2021, provision was made for 150 additional rehabilitation episodes. Will the Minister of State commit that those 150 episodes announced in the budget will be additional to the 709 episodes lost because of the closure of the 109 beds?

There is much more I could ask but the Minister of State could take a minute to respond.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: To be clear, Deputy Gould's colleagues have five minutes left. Is that it?

Deputy Thomas Gould: I can take the answers in writing from the Minister of State.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State is off the hook. I will go back to the Deputy's colleague unless the Minister of State wants to take 30 seconds.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Deputy Gould talked about addiction and gambling. It is a very serious issue that I share an interest in with the Deputy. It is also a Department of Justice issue. However, it crosses into our area. I would be happy to meet the objectives and work with them. There are other issues that we need to address and I can send the Deputy a paper on those.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are two other colleagues to speak. I call Deputy Paul Donnelly.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I thought we had three and a half minutes each. I thought it was 15 minutes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am not sure what the Deputy has. I am going by ten minutes. It is between the Deputies and nobody told me.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I will try and be as brief as possible because I want to try and get in a couple of answers from the Minister of State.

During the past year, the most vulnerable group has been the older cohort of drug misusers. In the initial stages, many of the services were closed and some of the workers were seconded to the HSE to deal with other front-line work that needed to be done. Many of them are back, but some of the services have not reopened as drop-in services and they are working through Zoom etc. Obviously, it leaves this group extremely vulnerable.

Between 2012 and 2018, the number of drug overdose deaths among the 50 plus age group increased by 75%. This problem is increasingly associated with older long-term drug users. In the past 12 months, that aging cohort has been more isolated and increasingly vulnerable. As it is clear that they will remain extremely vulnerable, are there any plans for a surge in funding for community-based projects on top of their current funding?

In relation to the broader aspect of the drug and alcohol task forces, I was a member of a drug and alcohol task force for a good number of years on several occasions and I found in the last term I served as a community representative that there was very little support. Originally, we would have had a community development worker. That had gone. My understanding from many of the drug services is that those community development workers have been moved to different positions or the position has been lost. It has broken a link between the community representatives and the community on the ground. It is an extremely important pillar of the National Drug Strategy that there are links between the community, drug and alcohol task forces and the drug strategy. Can we get a commitment that there will be a refocus on community development workers within drug task forces?

The most vulnerable group who are at risk of homelessness would be those who are engaged in drug and alcohol misuse. Can we get a commitment from the Government to extend the ban

on evictions up until the end of 2021 and a ban on rent increases to give people security that as we come out of this they will not end up in homelessness?

Deputy Pat Buckley: I will give the Minister of State a good news story for a change to start. Bernard O’Hehir is from Cork City. I know him well. Many years ago, he went through the addiction services. It is well documented. He actually had to lie to get help - that will tell you how serious the service was. He has formally now just finished a little book, *Memories & Hope: my long journey from there to here*. What he meant by “there” was “in the bad place”.

A previous speaker mentioned homelessness as well. It is joined-up thinking between the local services of county councils and city councils and the volunteer groups where resources need to be provided. At present, I have an individual case of a 64-year-old gentleman with underlying health problems who was in emergency accommodation. He was offered a HAP premises. It was utterly unsuitable, even for his health not to mind capabilities to get up three-to-four flights of stairs to access the room. Now the council has put pressure on him. Because he has refused the HAP, it will not support emergency accommodation. Technically, that person will be homeless within a week. We are talking about the Government pumping money in left, right and centre. The commonsense approach does not seem to there.

Another issue the Minister of State mentioned a while ago was dual-diagnosis. It is good to hear it being discussed in the Chamber but addiction can take many forms. It is grand for us to be inside here debating it, but the issue here is that none of us grows up to be a gambler, an alcoholic or a drug addict and to be homeless. It is a societal issue that we have left people down. There is very little joined-up thinking. There are some fabulous organisations on the ground and some amazing people within all the entities, whether it is the council or HSE, but they are not getting the supports. The magic line here is: prevention is better than cure. The issue is that we are a totally reactive society instead of being a proactive society and then when everything festers, we wonder, scratch our heads and ask, “How did that happen?” I appeal to both Ministers of State to start from the bottom up and treat the person rather than the problem in each case and, hopefully, we will address these issues.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before moving on to Labour, I only can work with the slots before me. There was a ten minute slot for Sinn Féin. I will happily divide a slot up if Members tell me. I will move on. I am simply saying what is there.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I will take that up with the Ceann Comhairle.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is okay. We will not take up the time now. I call Deputy Kelly.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I have only a few minutes but I want to ask a few questions as part of this. There is a great deal to cover. It is impossible to cover it, ask questions and get answers in five minutes but we will do our best.

In relation to homelessness, I know all of the organisations well and I am very much taken by some of the progress that has been made in the provision of wraparound services, particularly joined up with the approach from the HSE. I welcome much of what has been done. What lessons have been learnt in the past year that we can take on board in dealing with homelessness as we hopefully will come out of this pandemic in a year’s time, and can we keep them?

My second question relates to drug and alcohol services. We are all aware that there are

limitations in providing services online and not being able to meet. Being able to socialise and meet is part of this whole issue and Alcohol Anonymous, AA, and Narcotics Anonymous have been challenged as regards their meetings. What improvements can we make for them? Zoom does not work. What else are we looking at as we come through this because such services are unlikely to be face-to-face for some time?

A big issue for me is gambling. I certainly do not have enough time to deal with it. I have been raising this in the Dáil for years. The most dangerous development in gambling has been the smart phone. There are pop-up bets, free bets and advertising. My colleagues, Senator Wall and Deputy Ó Ríordáin, launched a Bill yesterday to ban advertising, not sponsorship, of gambling. This is not only a Department of Justice issue. This is a public health issue. During the pandemic, I can guarantee we will see a crisis due to gambling because people are spending so much time isolated, on their own or in family settings. It is so deadly dangerous. It needs to be fully regulated and advertising needs to be dealt with. Will the Minister of State support Senator Wall's Bill? The Senator does not care, as long as we get it through, how it gets through. The Senator is open to any form of changes and amendments. Trust me, societally, we all have to deal with this. Will the Minister of State please help?

My final two questions are for the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. Rural isolation is a significant issue. I spoke to a woman on my way up in the car this morning. She talked about how lonely she felt. I hear this every day. What are we doing to help those who are very isolated, be they in urban or rural areas, in particular those who do not see anyone from one end of the week to the other? In recent weeks, I have taken the time to ring people who I believed were lonely. What measures are we taking? I am glad that we have An Post. I am glad that we have local shops that are making deliveries. That is all these people see. When I told the lady this morning that I was going to mention her - not by name - to the Minister of State, she told me to ask the Minister of State to get on to RTE and ask it to at least rerun episodes of "Glenroe", "Bracken", "The Riordans" and "Strumpet City". It was not the worst idea in the world. They were what she was into.

I have a specific question relating to Jigsaw in my constituency. We had the ridiculous situation this week of Deputy Lowry announcing the wrong location for the service. I had known where it would be for a long time, as had the Minister of State's colleague, Deputy Cahill. Forget about all that rubbish, though. When will Jigsaw be open? There have been various statements about staff being recruited and the service being open in the next couple of weeks, but other staff have stated that they will not be recruited and in place before April. When will it actually be open and up and running? A number of previous dates have not been met.

It might buy the Ministers of State some time if they send me something in writing.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Yes. I will get the Deputy a written document with the up-to-date position on gambling. It is a cross-departmental matter, given that it is for the Department of Justice but also a public health issue. I have not seen the Bill, but I would support its gist. A great deal can be done. The Deputy is right, in that the pandemic has increased online gambling. I know that myself. Many young men in particular are gambling online. It is causing major difficulties and is beginning to become a public health issue. The Labour Party has my support in this regard. I do not know what is in the Bill, but its mood is something of which I would be supportive.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I also asked a question of the other Minister of State. Could I ask her

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to respond now? It is purely because of the time.

Deputy Mary Butler: I will briefly answer the question on Jigsaw. The lease for Jigsaw's premises in the Tipperary Technology Park in Thurles was finalised as of 5 February. The new premises are within walking distance. Some minor fitting-out works must be done. Due to Covid, those will not be able to commence until 5 March, assuming that is when the construction industry resumes working. Jigsaw is going through the required procurement procedures to get that work under way and concluded as soon as possible. The first members of the team will take up their posts in mid-April, with the remainder starting in the following weeks. All Jigsaw supports across the whole country have gone online. Anyone living anywhere in the country can access them online. I expect Jigsaw in Tipperary to be seeing clients face to face in April or May, but whether it can open its doors will depend on whether we are still under level 5 restrictions.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I understand that Deputy Alan Farrell is sharing time.

Deputy Alan Farrell: With Deputy Cathal Crowe, although I believe there may be a third Deputy who is not present currently.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Yes, Deputy Hourigan.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I will repeat a theme that began at the start of this discussion. During the pandemic, there has been a reduction in the availability of services. The Ministers of State are acutely aware of that. What level of additional funding or support will be put in place presently and as we head further into 2021? It is imperative that we recognise the general depression in society owing to the closure of schools and the lockdowns, which have had a wearying effect on us all after nearly 11 months. Unfortunately, this has consequences. Some individuals have taken to substance abuse. It must be recognised that we need to put in place the necessary funding and services to ensure they are supported.

My constituency has a young population in Swords, Balbriggan and emerging communities like Rush, Lusk and Donabate, all of which have more than 10,000 people. Fingal has the youngest and most diverse community in Ireland. The combination of the closure of schools and lockdowns has had unfortunate consequences. Foróige has a drug education service programme. We need to consider such alternative service providers for additional funding. I appreciate that this suggestion will cover many Departments, not just the Department of Health. What measures will be taken to support urban centres and, in particular, emerging communities like Balbriggan and Swords? What plans are being developed by the Department of Health to ensure the continuity of addiction services that have been provided throughout this extended period? Given its prevalence globally in recent years, the issue of opioid substance abuse is topical. The State offers treatment programmes. Perhaps the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, will comment on them.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Since the onset of Covid-19, 900 additional people have been seen by the opioid substitution treatment programme. They are being retained as part of the existing service level. Some €4.2 million has been provided for the service's continuation in 2021.

I have met all of the drugs and alcohol task forces and we are allocating funding. However, there are many initiatives, for example, Know the Score in respect of young children, and I hope

to work with them.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I wish to put a number of points to the Ministers of State and I hope that they will be able to respond within time.

Yesterday morning, I met Family Carers Ireland's County Clare branch, which is led by Ms Vicky Ward. It was a virtual meeting, as everything has gone virtual these days. Nonetheless, it was nice to be able to see the carers and engage with them. They have two significant concerns and I hope that the Ministers of State will be able to give them some assurances or indication of what will happen.

First, they seem to be way down the pecking order on the schedule of vaccinations. Actually, they do not really know where they are in the pecking order. The obvious approach to take is to categorise family carers, who care for vulnerable people in their home environments, as key workers. If we did, they would be at level 6 in the 15-point vaccination roll-out plan.

Second, they are finding it difficult to secure PPE. It is impossible. The HSE works like the spokes of a wheel. Imagine the local GP, pharmacy or primary care centre as being on the outer rim. That is the obvious point on the supply chain where family carers should be able to get sterile nitrile gloves and all of the other PPE they need to care for their loved ones at home. They are front-line workers, keeping people out of acute hospitals and filling a key role during this crisis. I ask that my suggestion be considered.

There is no discharge co-ordinator for the new 60-bed block at University Hospital Limerick. This means that when someone is about to be discharged but still requires acute care in the community environment, there is no one to devise a plan for the local health nurse and other local support mechanisms. Will the Ministers of State respond to this point?

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for his questions. I have met Family Carers Ireland and healthcare workers. We must consider the situation as it stands. Approximately 300,000 vaccine doses have entered the country and we had allocated 272,000 of them as of last night. We must keep a small buffer of approximately 20,000 every week so that the person who needs a second dose within 28 days can get it. If the supply was distorted for a week, we would need that buffer.

Unfortunately, 4,036 people have lost their lives, of whom 93% were over 65 years of age. To date, the group of vulnerable people has included our older generation and family members living in nursing homes and this prioritisation of older people has been correct. The Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, said in the Dáil last week that he has asked the National Immunisation Advisory Committee to look at the prioritisation again with regard to a large cohort of various groups. It will make some recommendations in the next two days.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: A number of weeks ago, I engaged with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, on a number of issues with regard to private emergency accommodation, which is a rapidly increasing proportion of the accommodation provided and, it seems, a very profitable one. The Minister persistently referenced the role of local authorities and the Dublin Region Homeless Executive in tackling our homelessness crisis but I believe the Government has a core duty in this area, of course in terms of policy and funding but also in ensuring legislation is adhered to and proper systems and governance structures are in place, particularly when it comes to private emergency accommodation and providing addiction and healthcare services to those who need them.

The HSE and the Department of Health have a particular role to play in terms of how they interact with private emergency accommodation in their role on the joint homelessness consultative forum. If I may focus on the links between addiction, mental health support and homelessness, all three are intrinsically intertwined and people can experience one, two or all three of them at periodically different points over their lifetime. The causes and consequences of homelessness are multifaceted and this should be recognised and addressed within the system of homeless services that we as a State provide, whether through private or public structures.

We need to see national guidance on the private provision of services. Specialist mental health professionals should be a formative part of the homeless services we provide. Specialist teams should engage in active outreach for every person experiencing homelessness, providing aftercare planning and assisting people into a home. My fear is that this is not happening where the service is privatised. For example, a small success over the past year has been a lowering of the barriers for those seeking to get on methadone, which is itself now recognised as an addiction issue. This is more difficult when the take-up of addiction programmes requires timely and direct access to information, staff and supports that might not be available in private providers. There is a lack of clarity about the quality, regularity, availability and efficacy of support services in private accommodation. What oversight does the Department of Health undertake to ensure that private providers in the sector are staffed with people who are fully Garda vetted and suitably qualified? We need to ensure that adequate physical, mental and emotional health supports are available within these private providers.

What oversight does the Department of Health have on the standard of accommodation being funded through the taxpayer? What is the frequency of unannounced inspections carried out by HIQA? Does HIQA carry out inspections? To date, what information has the Department collected on private emergency accommodation? Is the Department fully compliant with current procurement and tendering practices in the contracting of privatised emergency accommodation? We have increased spending in this area since 2016 by a huge percentage and have increased capacity by only 237 people. What are we seeing for this rise in cost?

Deputy Seán Crowe: I do not recognise the system the Ministers of State have described this morning. It is not my experience, particularly with regard to the wraparound supports that are supposedly available to those with problematic substance use who have become homeless. I say this not to score points but with the hope that the Ministers of State will move beyond the rhetoric and look at the real challenges facing people in these circumstances.

We are speaking about people who I would describe as adults at risk, who find themselves homeless and who might be on a drug or alcohol programme. They might be drug or alcohol free if they are lucky. They have changed their lives around. Some of them might be coming out of jail, full of hope and good intentions, determined to change their lives around and not repeat mistakes. What happens to these homeless people? If they are lucky, they are offered a couch or a bed and to stay with friends but for the majority it is the hostel route. The first challenge then is to get a bed but they are not given a choice about that bed. They are put into an environment of active drug users and alcohol use. It is a system set up to fail and this is the point I want to make this morning. The odds are against anyone going into one of these hostels with regard to staying off drugs. In many cases, they go into an environment of very active intimidation. If people go into dormitory-style accommodation and those around them are injecting, taking drugs or smoking, it is very difficult not to partake. Equally, it is difficult if those in these circumstances, with the backgrounds they have, have had difficulties in the past with drugs.

Wraparound services for those in these difficulties do not exist in many cases. We can ask people who are sleeping rough tonight. I saw enough of them sleeping in doorways as I came in here this morning. What they will all say is they feel frightened and intimidated going into these hostels. We spend an absolute fortune in taxpayers' money on the homeless situation but we are putting people in danger. We are putting people at greater risk. I am asking the Ministers of State to intervene and become more active and be a voice for those people who want a choice and want to be put into a hostel that is drug free or alcohol free. Perhaps this morning we should be arguing for giving people more choice to support those in these circumstances. I would love to hear the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, saying he might go down this route and might take the path I am asking him to take.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I have met many of the stakeholders. It is not rhetoric. I am informed that in 2020, some 1,006 single persons exited emergency accommodation into homes in the Dublin region. A lot of work has been done regarding rough sleeping and long-term users of emergency accommodation. It is not perfect but much good work has been done and we are putting a lot of resources into achieving it.

Deputy Gary Gannon: When we are given long presentations, such as those we have heard this morning, I am often fascinated by what is missed and what is not said. I am quite surprised that the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, did not refer to drug-related debt or intimidation, which are endemic not just in my community in Dublin Central but in communities all over Dublin and - I imagine - all over Ireland. I ask the Minister of State to tell me if I missed such a reference in his presentation. Issues relating to drug-related debt cannot be separated from the experiences being catered for and trying to be managed by drug services and homeless services. I am very interested in why this was missed in the presentation and I will build my first question around it. We are coming up to the midterm review of the national drugs strategy. Will the midterm review factor in how endemic drug-related debt and intimidation are? Will the Minister of State provide these services? What models will they consist of? I would be shocked if drug-related debt and intimidation were not factored into the midterm review of the drugs and alcohol strategy.

My next question also pertains to the midterm review of the drug strategy and the health diversion programme. Will the health diversion programme, which I believe has inbuilt limitations, continue to criminalise people in their struggle with health and trauma-related illness if they have more than one conviction for possession of drugs? If that is the case, any conversation about empathy or understanding goes out the window if we continue to criminalise people who I do not believe are committing crimes.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy. I had a speech prepared that would have taken 15 or 20 minutes but, as the Deputy very rightly said, I had to remove something because I only had ten minutes. Regarding drug-related intimidation, I am very aware of such activity. An active illicit drug market leads to intimidation and a frightening environment for families and communities. A key action of the national drugs strategy is to strengthen the effectiveness of the drug-related intimidation reporting programme. I will speak about this in the national midterm review. If the Deputy wishes, he is more than welcome to make submissions to the midterm review and I will be happy to meet him because this is a very important issue. The National Family Support Network has funded a drug-related intimidation trainer co-ordinator. The gardaí are very aware of that. The network has carried out evaluations of the drug-related intimidation programme, which has resulted in a number of improvements in its effectiveness. I look forward to what the Deputy stated.

There are issues with the health diversion programme. We are working with the Department of Justice to implement the programme. It is part of the national drugs strategy and I look forward to phasing it in. On the costs involved, there will be a pilot programme involving five different areas around the country to determine how it works.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Minister of State referenced the drug-related intimidation project work, which was an initiative of the National Family Support Network. It is very important to state that the role referenced by the Minister of State ceased almost a month and a half ago. It was a success, but has now been defunded. One of the last acts of the project was the commissioning of a report which demonstrated that in a very small part of the north inner city more than 20% of respondents who were surveyed said they had suffered from drug-related intimidation.

There is an urgent need to get this right. I would strongly encourage the Minister of State to not just to get it right in my constituency and draw a line around it, but to get it right all over the country. We need a new model and approach to how we deal with the consequences of drugs. It needs to be trauma informed and led. I would be happy to partake in those discussions. We should widen them and there should be a collective effort because for more than 40 or 45 years we have applied the same mechanisms in our response to drugs and we keep getting the same old outcomes, namely, continued marginalisation, violence and deprivation. I would love to partake of those discussions.

I ask the Minister of State to factor us in. The discussions should be evidence led. Let us stop repeating the mistakes of the past. Most specifically, we should stop criminalising people who have experienced huge trauma and are self-medicating for that reason. If we can get one thing right over the course of the next few years, it would be to fundamentally change how we deal with this issue as a Republic.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the Ministers of State to the House, as well as the opportunity to discuss drug, alcohol and homeless services during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the first wave of the pandemic services for the most vulnerable people were severely impacted. The resumption of services for people with drug or alcohol dependency and the continuation of homeless services is to be very much welcomed. It must be noted that the impact of Covid-19 restrictions are not equal. People who are homeless or those living in overcrowded accommodation find it much more difficult to self isolate or restrict their movements and interactions. This is compounded in cases where there is an addiction or alcohol or drug use.

People often have complex health needs. People who are homeless are at a higher risk of contracting Covid-19 and are more likely to require emergency healthcare services during the winter months. I welcome the extra funding provided by the Government and the Department, along with the HSE winter plan, to support people who are homeless. In particular, the €4 million allocated by the Department to address the addiction and mental health needs of people who are homeless is very welcome. I understand this includes health supports for 218 new tenancies under the housing first programme and customised healthcare plans for 1,300 people living in single person accommodation.

Some of the individual measures in Dublin are especially welcome. They include: the continuation of the seven-day dedicated homeless response team; the operation of a 110-bed isolation unit for homeless families and single people, supported by nursing, GP and social care services; health supports for 250 people cocooning while living in private versus accommodation; support for single people who are homeless, including an 18-bed unit for people with

complex needs; and provision for mobile testing, tracing and self isolation facilities for people who are homeless with suspected cases of Covid-19.

I want to acknowledge the efforts of everyone in this area, in particular those on the front line, local authorities and organisations such as Inner City Helping Homeless which has continued to do fantastic work throughout the pandemic. In the medium term it is important to acknowledge the success of the housing first programme. I look forward to seeing these critical initiatives expanded in line with the commitments in the programme for Government.

Can the Minister of State confirm the number of residential treatment places available for people in need of addiction support? Are there plans to increase the number of beds? I ask for a response on that in writing.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I would like to make a point to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, on vaccine availability for carers. She has given this serious consideration. I would like to lend my voice to those comments.

The past year has been very tough for many people. During this lockdown, in particular, it is clear that many people are feeling lower than ever before and are really struggling this time around. Loneliness, isolation and the loss of loved ones has taken its toll on so many. There is light at the end of the tunnel and we know that vaccines are on the way. The good news about the Johnson & Johnson vaccine yesterday is proof that brighter days are ahead.

However, I am worried that the necessary lockdowns and associated social isolation so many have experienced may result in a mental health pandemic and an increase in the substance use and addiction. Employers, social workers and gardaí all report a significant increase in mental health issues. Drug and alcohol addiction and mental illness are often linked. The last three lockdowns have resulted in people drinking at home far more than previously. There is absolutely nothing wrong with having a drink at home, but there is growing evidence that for many people binge drinking at home is on the increase. Arising from this, there are higher rates of domestic abuse and more frequent calls to helplines, especially to the likes of Childline. This is very worrying for our young people.

The staggeringly low prices of alcohol in off-licences and large supermarkets is leading to increased rates of binge drinking, especially in our homes. We have to address this. We must commence the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 so that minimum unit pricing comes into effect. This legislation aims to combat harmful drinking. The current pandemic is further proof that it is time to enact this legislation without delay.

Minimum unit pricing is long overdue. The longer the Government waits to enact these laws, the more alcohol will be abused. This is resulting in major damage to people's health. Alcohol abuse in the home also has a seriously damaging effect on the mental health of the young people who witness it. The longer the Government waits to tackle alcohol abuse, in particular in the home, the longer the vicious circle of alcohol dependency and addiction will continue through the generations. This needs to be addressed.

While I am on the topic of mental health, I was delighted to welcome the news from the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, this week that a suitable location has been found for the Tipperary Jigsaw centre that will be located in my home town, Thurles. She told me during a Zoom call on Monday that a lease was signed between two parties which will see Jigsaw being located in Tipperary technology park on the Nenagh Road outside Thurles. The facility will be within

walking distance of the town centre and will provide mental health supports and services for the young people of Tipperary.

It is important to stress that these service are currently available online for people all over the country. I thank the Minister of State for the significant effort she has put into securing this service. It is something for which I have campaigned since I was first elected in 2016. It gives me great satisfaction to see the lease finally signed. The service will be up and running in early spring.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Last week in my constituency, Ballymun, we saw the death of another man related to the illegal drugs industry. While other Deputies have spoken about addiction to gambling or alcohol, the reality is that if this gentleman had not had an addiction to illegal drugs he might likely be alive. If it is difficult to deal with the alcohol or gambling industry, try dealing with the Kinahans.

The reality is that we need to consider the commitments in the programme for Government to move towards examining how we dismantle the organised crime industry around the supply sale and supply of illegal drugs and ensure that we deal with people who have an addiction in a humane and health led way. In order to do that, we need to fund our local drugs task forces. I ask the Minister of State, given that there has not been an increase in funding for these task forces for more than six years, whether he can examine what funding might be available in next year's budget to ensure that we support this important work.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I have made more than €1 million available for local drugs task forces.

11 o'clock

We also have up to €460,000 for targeted initiatives which we are seeking from various task forces. Again, I pay tribute to the great work the task forces are doing. I am aware of the awful situation in the Deputy's constituency, and the Deputy raised it with me previously. I am looking forward to a report that is due to come from the constituency. That will inform us of how best to move forward as well. I thank the Deputy for raising these issues. I am available to meet the local task force when we are allowed to after the Covid-19 lockdown. However, I have met most of the task forces online.

Deputy Mark Ward: Funding for local drug task forces is €3 million less than it was ten years ago, despite repeated promises from successive Governments. As a former director of the Clondalkin Drug and Alcohol Task Force, I have seen at first hand how addiction services have tried to do more with less. Drug and alcohol task forces need multi-annual funding to provide the services their communities desperately need. In 2019, almost €69 million was seized by the Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB. This money originated in areas with high levels of deprivation, such as my area in north Clondalkin. The deprivation and poverty were caused by systemic failures in Government policies.

Drug intimidation can take many forms. One can walk around some previously quiet estates in Clondalkin and see drug dealing taking place with relative impunity. Neighbours are absolutely terrified. The money these unscrupulous drug dealers are getting is money that, hopefully, is eventually seized by the CAB. This money must be put back into these communities. The money that goes to the CAB originates from the purses of mothers who are paying drug dealers due to intimidation. It should be ring-fenced to build resilience in communities.

It should not be used to replace current funding or as an excuse not to increase further funding down the road. It should be used to resource community initiatives in the communities that have been failed by successive Governments. Has the Government even considered putting the money that has been ripped from our communities directly back into them?

People who have dual diagnosis often fall between the gaps. Addiction and ill mental health often occur hand in hand. An addiction may lead to the onset of a mental health issue, or a mental health issue can lead to people using substances as a coping mechanism. Due to the inadequacies in the State's mental health system, people can turn to drink and drugs to bring calm to an anxious inner world. Deputy Gould and I have legislation, the Health (Amendment) (Dual Diagnosis: No Wrong Door) Bill 2021, that is due to come before the House on Second Stage, and I will ask the Government to support it when it is before the House.

Finally, one has only to walk through parks and estates to see discarded nitrous oxide canisters, which are also known as "silver bullets". As community structures for children, such as sports, schools and youth clubs, have been decreased due to the pandemic and restrictions, the use of nitrous oxide has increased. The problem is that children are playing Russian roulette with this substance. They do not know how it will affect them until they take it. What measures has the Minister of State taken to combat this? Does he still believe it is just a Dublin problem, as he stated previously?

Deputy Frankie Feighan: First, I agree with the Deputy regarding the ring-fencing of funding. My colleague, Deputy Richmond, and others have been to the forefront in that regard, so perhaps it is time for a debate on the subject of putting the money put back into the local drugs task forces or into addressing the issues. On the funding, in November 2020 I approved one-off funding of €20,000 for each task force, including the Deputy's local task force, to assist in the continuation and restoration of drug and alcohol services during the pandemic. I have also allocated an additional €1 million for a new funding scheme for task forces in 2021, to increase the core funding. I have met all the task forces and I have asked them to let us know what they require. My departmental officials and I will do everything we can to help them with their funding or whatever resources are necessary. It is an issue, and I thank the local drug and alcohol task forces for the work they are doing to address this awful problem.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I thank the Minister of State for his statement. This is probably the first time I have formally engaged with him so I wish him well during his tenure in office. We have different views on alcohol and drug policies, but as the conclusion of the Minister of State's statement says, it is about harm reduction. That is what it is about, because the previous policies of other Governments have been a failure. Obviously, the pandemic has imposed major pressures on alcohol and drug intervention supports. People cannot go there physically now and that is causing big difficulties for people for whom they were an outlet. That is not available anymore, and it is not the same doing it remotely. There is a big lacuna in that regard and, hopefully, that can be addressed in the next three or four months.

I have a number of questions for the Minister of State about the drugs strategy. In my opinion, the current policy is a complete failure. It is failing people. It is good that the Minister of State referenced health inequalities faced by people who are homeless and in addiction. This is a societal matter that must be teased out. The debate on decriminalisation has been ongoing for years. It goes around and around, but nobody answers. I understand the Citizens' Assembly will discuss decriminalisation. We have to understand what decriminalisation means. It is decriminalising the person, rather than the drugs the person has for personal use. We want to

find out when the Citizens' Assembly will discuss this and if there will be decriminalisation for personal use. It has worked in other jurisdictions. Will this be implemented?

I believe we must go further than decriminalisation in respect of certain drugs, particularly cannabis and the possession of cannabis. Bringing people through the criminal justice system, that is, bringing them to court and giving them sentences and criminal convictions, is a failure. What is the Minister of State's opinion on the legalisation of cannabis in the drugs strategy during his tenure?

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy for the measured way in which he put his views forward. We come from different perspectives, but between us we try to get the best possible answers to this very difficult problem. The national drugs strategy sets out a health-led approach to drug use and it promotes a more compassionate and humane response to people who use drugs, with drug use treated as, first and foremost, a public health issue. As the Deputy knows, the Government established a working group and that group decided it would opt for the health-led approach to possession of drugs for personal use. Effectively, what we are trying to do with a first offence is to get people to interact with the health services on a pathway to recovery, avoiding a criminal conviction.

We have met the Cannabis Risk Alliance group, which offers another perspective. The group includes GPs and psychiatrists with significant expertise in the fields of addiction and psychiatry. They are also parents. They outlined the damaging effects of cannabis, particularly for adolescents. We cannot be complacent about the risk to health posed by illicit drugs, but we have set out a health-led approach. Hopefully, the health diversion programme will be a start whereby people who are caught in possession for the first time will get a health diversion programme. Second, it will be at the discretion of the Garda. However, I cannot envisage legalisation because sometimes it leads to decriminalisation which can have a knock-on effect. I would welcome the Deputy's submissions to the mid-term review of the national oversight committee. I thank the Deputy for his observations and his co-operation as we work on trying to resolve this issue.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Ministers of State for coming to the House to speak on this important issue. I speak as a former member of a ministerial drugs task force. I empathise with some of the points raised by people who are directly involved on the ground in dealing with the addiction issues. Very often they have a different perspective than that which we as legislators have. I always saw methadone as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Unfortunately, over the years, the aim of its use has become vague. We need to go back to base on that. I do not agree with my colleague, Deputy Gino Kenny, on legalisation. We have too many gateway drugs. These may not be the worst substances but they do lead to others which are serious. The late Martin Naughton used to say if a person has a mental or physical disability, they certainly have a problem, if they have a mental or physical disability and an addiction, they have a problem but if someone has all those and is homeless as well, they will really have a serious problem. He was correct and I pay tribute to Martin Naughton and the work he did for people with disabilities for many years.

I ask the Ministers of State to give an indication on whether the programme for Government commitments on harm reduction programmes can be kept on track. I emphasise harm reduction in particular. It is about reducing harm rather than resolution but we have to start somewhere. Is the Minister of State satisfied he is on track and will continue to make a meaningful and positive impact in reducing harm, and that he has the resources to do so?

Others have mentioned residential places for treatment. It is impossible to get a residential place for a person who has an addiction. If they have a mental health problem and other problems, and also have an addiction, we cannot find places for them. The services are coming down with requests making it very difficult for those at the coalface, providing the direct service to do the job they are expected to do.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: The Department of Health harm reduction element of the health diversion programme provided €100,000 in 2020 to develop a national harm reduction campaign to raise awareness of the risk associated with drug use. The campaign will be delivered in 2021.

Deputy Colm Burke: I wish to raise the 24-7 helpline for people with drug and alcohol addiction. What is the status of this? It is very important because drug and alcohol addiction does not go away at 5 p.m. and there is a need for a 24-hour helpline.

Some Members have raised joined-up thinking and co-operation between local authorities and the prison services. I was recently working with a voluntary group in Cork at night. We were outside the Simon Community in Cork and met a girl who had been discharged from Limerick Prison that day at 3.30 p.m. She got a bus to Cork but there seems to have been no joined up thinking to ensure that she had some place to go once she was released from prison. Can we do a lot more in the area of co-operation? Similarly, when someone is discharged from mental health services, it should be ensured that they have an adequate place to go. We need to do much more in co-operation in this area. I would like a response on those issues.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: On the 24-7 drugs line, there is a drugs helpline in the UK that we have been trying to mirror. It is called Talk to Frank but it will not be called that here. There is a budget allocation of €170,000 for the service and the recruitment of three addiction counselors is under way. It will not be 24 hour but it will be expanded to what we think will be needed, based on advice from stakeholders.

On the issue of the young lady, I ask the Deputy to give me the information and we will try to determine how best to address that.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I wish to take this opportunity to highlight the work of Clondalkin councillor, Kenneth Egan, who has been lobbying for the proceeds of crime seized by the Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, to be invested back into the communities which have been so negatively impacted by drugs, the drugs trade and the anti-social behaviour and crime that comes with that. He recently discussed this with the Minister for Justice, and Deputy Richmond has been drafting legislation on this. I am glad to hear the Minister of State say that he would welcome some of that money being reinvested into drug task forces such as the one in Clondalkin.

I thank the Minister of State for everything he has done on nitrous oxide canisters. One in four festival goers in 2019 used nitrous oxide to get high. They became a huge issue in my area during summer, littering parks in Lucan and Clondalkin. Thankfully the prevalence of silver bullets strewn across our parks and footpaths dissipated last year. Unfortunately, the latest lockdown has seen a resurgence of teenagers using nitrous oxide canisters to get cheap highs. Again, the silver bullets can be seen on our streets and in our parks.

Social restrictions have challenged us all in so many ways and it is natural that people are turning to escapes from reality. Many see nitrous oxide as a low risk laugh but it can have life threatening and even grave consequences. Neurologists are crystal clear about that and, sadly,

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families across the country have seen this first hand. We need young people to understand the dangers these canisters present. We need their parents to be on the lookout for deliveries of boxes of nitrous oxide canisters to the family home by courier. These canisters can be purchased online for as little as €2 and delivered straight to one's door. They are too readily available and too affordable not to become a temptation to bored teenagers during lockdown, but those teenagers need to understand the risks and it is our job to protect them from those risks.

Social restrictions have also had an impact on those struggling with addiction. Pregnant women and those who have recently given birth are particularly vulnerable among those overcoming the challenge of addiction. For them, it is not just about getting their life back on track but also providing a future for their child. What supports have been put in place to better support pregnant women and new mums and their children affected by substance misuse?

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Unfortunately, the issue of drugs in my home city of Limerick has worsened during the pandemic on what seems like a daily basis. The issue is not new. Previous Ministers have failed utterly in dealing with the issue and sometimes I wonder if they bothered at all. There is a specific problem in the St. Mary's Park area of Limerick which I wish to raise with the Minister of State. I mentioned this estate to him before and to the Minister for Justice. I have also raised it with the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste. It needs urgent intervention from the Government with additional resources from An Garda Síochána, the Criminal Assets Bureau, the Courts Service, Limerick City and County Council and other agencies.

This is an older, very settled housing estate with many wonderful working families who have lived there for generations. It has some of the finest people one will ever encounter. Many of them are my friends. They worked all their lives when they could. Now it feels as though drugs and drug gangs have taken over and, worse still, seem to operate with impunity. These drug dealers ignore planning regulations regularly, building unauthorised structures that need to be removed but which remain *in situ*, with public land grabbed and retained which needs to be reclaimed, and walls built in total disregard of planning regulations. As we speak, a structure is being constructed for which there is no planning permission. Council officials have told me privately that they are afraid to enforce many of the regulations. Derelict houses that are due for demolition are used to store drugs. Despite Garda requests, these structures remain *in situ* as the warehouses of the wicked.

The Defence Forces were deployed last year in Limerick to assist the Criminal Assets Bureau. They should be called on again, if necessary, to deal with the ongoing problems.

The local drugs gangs regularly give two fingers to everybody. The two fingers from these drugs gangs are not just to me, the local community, An Garda Síochána or Limerick council; they are two fingers to the entire State.

In drugs seizures across the city, crack cocaine was among the drugs seized. Crack cocaine, as the Minister of State knows, is a devastating drug. It has destroyed communities across the world. It is extremely addictive and is regarded as the most addictive form of cocaine. As I have said previously in the Dáil and will repeat, there really is a special place in hell for anyone who sells, distributes, benefits or profits from the sale of crack cocaine.

Unfortunately, drug dealing operates like a 24-hour drive-through. Taxis often form queues while people from all over the region purchase their drugs. Many people simply walk into the estate. It is like a non-stop drugs supermarket. The vast bulk of people getting their drugs do

not live in the area.

It has been said to me that the most vulnerable can be brought to court for often very minor offences but drug dealers, many facing serious charges, can swan around the city selling their filth while ruining lives and communities.

In the mid-2000s the drugs problem in Limerick was ignored. That cost us massively. It cost the State resources and it cost people their lives. The failure to act then ultimately led to a need for massive Government intervention, which ultimately led to the Limerick regeneration programme. I implore the Minister of State to act now. He has no time to lose. We do not want to return to those very dark days. The residents need assurance that they are not being abandoned. I am in contact with them on an almost daily basis. They feel utterly abandoned.

In terms of my question to the Minister of State, we need a specific task force in the area that could be modelled on what has been achieved in areas of Dublin. Will he commit to doing that and to talking to his colleagues?

Deputy Denis Naughten: Last June I wrote to the predecessor of the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, pointing out that Portiuncula University Hospital, in Ballinasloe, was in a desperate situation because it had lost 10% of its acute hospital bed capacity due to Covid-19 reconfiguration. The hospital took a very proactive approach with regard to it and forwarded two very specific proposals to the HSE. The first was to develop two separate modular buildings - one for the accident and emergency department that would segregate Covid and non-Covid patients, and one to take the outpatient department out of the acute hospital and convert the old outpatient department into 13 single rooms. Currently, Portiuncula hospital, which is one of the biggest acute hospitals servicing the midlands, has only 13 single rooms. To compound that, it is down by 10% in terms of its bed capacity.

While funding has been forthcoming for the modular building for the outpatient department, refurbishment work has not taken place in the old outpatient department and funding has not been provided for the second modular building for the accident and emergency department. As a result, the hospital is operating at 10% below its capacity today, with just 13 single rooms, and is not in a position to manage the pandemic and the day-to-day challenges it is facing.

Thirty-six days ago here in the House I asked the Minister if funding will be provided to expedite the refurbishment of the old outpatient department. I also asked him if he would provide funding to ensure that we had a modular building to deal with the unacceptable situation we are currently experiencing in the accident and emergency department. On 13 January, the Minister said he would revert to me with the response with regard to that. I am still waiting on that response, and more than 130 patients in Portiuncula hospital have waited on trolleys overnight since the Minister gave me that response. Can I have a response today as to what is happening in Portiuncula hospital?

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy. Portiuncula University Hospital in Ballinasloe is an acute general and maternity hospital that delivers a patient-centred, quality-driven, focused service and provides a wide range of diagnostics and support services. The hospital's catchment area includes patients residing in east Galway, Roscommon, the midlands and mid-western areas.

As part of the winter 2020 plan, additional space will be provided at Portiuncula University Hospital with a prefab modular building for segregation, which will provide an immediate solu-

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tion for emergency department streaming for winter 2020 at the hospital. The modular building proposed will provide for 14 temporary Covid-19 emergency department, ED, minor injuries treatment and assessment rooms, with associated support facilities. The unit will have a residual value for the displacement of outpatient accommodation after the Covid-19 emergency.

The construction works to the modular building at Portiuncula University Hospital will be complete by the end of the first week of March 2021. The hospital will commission the building for occupation of the outpatient department in the week ending 12 March 2021 and it is expected that the modular building will operate as an outpatient department from Monday, 15 March.

The HSE has advised that it is intended to advertise for contractors for the construction of the 50-bed ward block at Portiuncula University Hospital in the first quarter of 2021 with a view to commencing works in summer 2021, subject to the availability of funding.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I thank the Minister of State for his response and providing at least some clarity on this matter but we still will not have additional bed capacity as a result of that. I ask him to take that back to his senior Minister.

There is no doubt that we need to get more vaccine into the country but we also need to ensure that when that vaccine comes it can be administered to people as quickly as possible. An online portal has been established for this process and that will be key to administering those vaccines. Currently, pharmacists are in the process of registering online to be vaccinated but the system is not fit for purpose. For the past number of weeks people have been unable to register on it. One individual contacted the HSE nine days ago with regard to it and has not received a response. Those who have been able to register on it have not yet received a confirmation email to say that the registration has been recorded and no one has received an appointment for vaccination. The HSE has acknowledged that the system is not working because it has now put a helpline in place but if we cannot organise the online portal for registering pharmacists how, in God's name, are we going to do it when we have 65,000 people a day availing of vaccination from May of this year based on the current commitments in terms of delivery? We really need to get this right.

The final point I want to make relates to the impact the lockdown is having on other health services. While community nursing staff are carrying out health screening checks on children, those referred for audiology are left in an appalling situation. I will give the figures for Roscommon and Galway but it is being replicated across the country. In Roscommon, the current waiting time for paediatric referrals for audiology is 56 weeks; for adults it is 76 weeks. In Galway, it is 55 weeks for children and 72 weeks for adults. How can we ensure that children will be able to engage in education and in society if they cannot hear and they cannot get an appointment with an audiologist?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Substance abuse, principally drug and alcohol misuse, is rising throughout our country. As a rural Deputy, I see the growth of drug use in every corner of Cavan-Monaghan and north Meath. It is no longer confined to towns and the margins of society or shadowy places. It is in every strata of society in every village and townland. Young and old are represented in drug misuse statistics and the longer people sustain drug misuse, the more likely they are to die because of that misuse. There are more drug-related deaths than road fatalities. That is staggering.

At an AA meeting, new members introduce themselves by their name and their admission of

addiction, which is the first tentative step of acknowledging the problem and seeking recovery. I fear that we are not near that stage with drug addiction in rural Ireland. With the availability and spread of drugs throughout the country we are in danger of losing a generation if we do not engage with the issue as quickly as possible. We must start by recognising the problem and its extent, having support groups within towns throughout the country, ensuring there are resources and services dealing with the addictions, and widely promoting and making helplines available. The social acceptance of drug and alcohol use has severe implications for the longer term. Serious health problems are being stored, and dysfunctional families and lost individuals are other consequences. Peer education surrounding the dangers of alcohol and drug misuse is another venue worthy of developing and piloting nationally. The dated approach we have seen up to now of lecturing and highlighting risks is now seen as counterproductive. The power of peers promoting health and well-being among youths and within clubs may achieve much more.

Will the Minister of State continue her endeavours in making Jigsaw a priority in Cavan and Monaghan, as we have one of the highest rates of youth suicide in the country?

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for her question, as she has demonstrated a concentrated effort over many years in dealing with youth mental health matters. As we know, Jigsaw provides services for young people between the ages of 12 and 25. We are currently in a level 5 lockdown but Jigsaw supports are available to everyone online. Young people can use those services through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or by logging on to www.jigsaw.ie. Those supports are there for everybody, regardless of where they live. I will continue to work with the Deputy on getting that physical presence in Cavan and Monaghan.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State for taking the time to discuss access to drug and alcohol treatment services during the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid-19 poses a major threat for people with drug and alcohol addiction and, in response, drug and alcohol services have adapted with new ways of working to continue to support people affected by substance misuse during the pandemic. Their work should be commended.

A key priority for the Government during Covid-19 is to protect, safeguard and support health, social care and other essential services. The safe resumption of community-based drug and alcohol services is a key component of this approach. Drug and alcohol treatment services are playing a vital role throughout the country in reducing harmful substance misuse and supporting rehabilitation and recovery. Covid-19 is a stressful time for people right across the country, leading to a rise in the level of alcohol consumption. According to the latest Drinkaware report published during the summer, one person in four is drinking more since Covid-19 came to Ireland. It is clear alcohol can be used as a mechanism to help people relax and unwind, but we must recognise the changing pattern in alcohol consumption and habits the pandemic has brought about. We must ensure the people who feel they need help in this period to tackle a potential alcohol addiction can get access to the supports they require.

Drug and alcohol treatment services have had to adapt to new ways of working to continue to support people affected by substance misuse during the current pandemic. I welcome the provision of €480,000 in once-off funding to support the restoration of drug and alcohol services. I sincerely ask that the Government continues to give whatever financial assistance is required to ensure these services can continue to operate efficiently.

It is important that we start a national conversation around alcohol use. The Drinkaware report highlights that 25% of people also saw a decline in alcohol consumption, highlighting the

changing nature of drinking patterns, which is quite interesting. Understandably, much of the change in drinking patterns has been due to extended periods of reduced contact and isolation, and we must therefore monitor these patterns of behaviour as we emerge from the pandemic to ensure the right form of services are available. Addiction may be caused by many factors, and we should not stigmatise people who suffer from addiction. It is an illness and we must treat it as such.

Covid-19 has had many profound effects on people throughout the country and the relationship with addiction is one of them. We must ensure we have the necessary support in place to meet such challenges.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: This week, from 14 February to 20 February, is international children of alcoholics week, so it is a good week to raise matters that affect children in this way because of Covid-19. According to the independent research of the Silent Voices initiative, one in six children lives in a home with problem parental alcohol use. This has become much more of an issue in lockdown and I am deeply concerned about the continued closure of schools, a place where children affected by these matters could reach out to find support.

A study by Alcohol Action Ireland and University College Cork has reported an approximate figure of 200,000 children living in households seeing an impact from alcohol use, with a further 400,000 raised in homes where alcohol abuse was a feature. It recommends mandatory training in schools to recognise pupils experiencing these challenges at home but children are not in school now, so what is being done to support teachers working online or checking in once a week? How can they support these children and what plans are there to bring such support when the schools reopen?

There is also the question of funding for support services in the community. In the past I have raised how matters often cross Departments, and alcohol dependency and addiction, for example, can often cross into the Departments dealing with justice or housing matters. This week I was contacted by the Carlow Women's Aid, which is under pressure because of funding shortages. These types of service are vital for support when women are fleeing domestic violence. This is a major issue that has had an impact on so many families and people. All Departments should work together to find solutions. Other speakers and I have said that we might ring one Department for one matter and have to ring another when something else arises. With Covid-19 and the time we are in, all Departments must work together. I am seeking extra funds for Women's Aid in Carlow and we must support all these services.

Deputy Mary Butler: Some of the Deputy's comments fall outside my remit but I agree wholeheartedly with her comments on how so many young children have regressed and are finding it very difficult. It is very important that young children return to school. The Deputy knows the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State at the Department, Deputy Josepha Madigan, have been working really hard over the past two to three weeks with the educational partners, the schools and unions to try to facilitate a safe return to school. I am thankful we will have more good news in the next few days. Yesterday, for example, it was announced that there is a hope for a phased return to school from 1 March. We hope we can work towards that because we know that when children are in a routine, they have better structure and are better off.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I will share time with Deputy Michael Collins. There are many types of front-line workers and I draw attention to those front-line workers in the home-

lessness sector, where in many cases they work in a voluntary capacity. They are among the front-line worker heroes so I acknowledge and thank them for the work they do. This work is challenging at the best of times but especially now in times of Covid-19.

In Limerick we are very fortunate to have several voluntary organisations helping the homeless. For example, there is the Simon Communities, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and Novas, which has been with us in Limerick since 2002. It also works in Clare, Tipperary, Kerry and Cork, and its goal is to bring humanity to this work. Everybody is entitled to a home.

Today, on 18 February 2021, more than 250 people are homeless in Limerick, of which approximately 150 are children. Those numbers are reflected throughout the country. Homelessness affects all strands of society and a commitment should be made to single persons, who amount to over 50% of people on the waiting list. Will the Government commit to delivering on its promise of 9,500 new social housing units in 2021? Targets can grab headlines but the reality is different. In January 2020, the Fianna Fáil leader and current Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, promised 100,000 social houses in five years of government. He is now the leader of the Government and has rowed back on the commitment of 20,000 homes per year to less than half that target, if that. If he is honest, it will not be met and we will come nowhere near it.

Isolation and boredom has really driven problems with gambling. In rural areas gardaí have witnessed a massive increase in drug-driving, which demonstrates our problems in targeting drugs. This is not just about young people as it concerns all ages. People are prosecuted for drug offences, including supply, and great work is done by the Criminal Assets Bureau. All the recovered money should go back to front-line services, including gardaí, to protect the next generation.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on these matters, particularly the misuse of drugs and alcohol. Many people are struggling during this blooming pandemic. Young people in particular are struggling. It has never been more important to make sure that treatment centres are open and are kept going. It is sad to note that in the short lifetime of this Government, the Cara Lodge residential treatment centre in Enniskeane has been closed. It was open for many years. I raised the issue with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who said it was an issue for the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan. I also raised the important question of trying to save the service with the Taoiseach on the floor of the House. Funnily enough, the Taoiseach opened the centre. He was quite willing to come down to open the centre, with all the razzmatazz that entailed, but when it came to saving the service, he was like a scalded cat escaping out of a skylight. I appreciate that the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, did get back to me on the issue. He did explain that the service was not being used. It could easily have been saved. It was the only tier 4 service in Munster that was available. A different use could have been made of the centre. It was a fabulous place for those who used it. I read the comments from those who had used the service. They had their lives transformed. The staff who worked there did not just work with the patients, but also worked with the families. They tackled the issues and problems of the young people successfully, 99% of the time. Sadly, that service is now lost. It is easy to run down a service. There is no problem running down a service anywhere in the country. If it is planned a few years in advance the fences will be put up before there is any chance of survival.

The other situation arising out of this issue concerns jobs. In the letter he wrote in response to me, the Minister of State promised that the jobs that were there would be adequately looked after following the closure. That is not happening. That must be looked into. The staff cannot

even get a reference to get another job. The centre provided 27 jobs all over west Cork. Obviously, there were other services feeding into it, but it amounted to 27 jobs in places from Skibbereen, all the way back to Doorus, Clonakilty and Bandon. Those jobs are now gone. That these people have been treated in a such shoddy way is scandalous beyond belief. It was a trick to close the centre. The Taoiseach did nothing when I asked him about it. He said he would look into the matter, but I did not hear anything from him. The staff continue to be treated shoddily. The biggest loss was the loss of the centre for the young people of this country. It was the only tier 4 centre in Munster and it was closed under this Government. My belief is that people of south-west Cork are being punished by this Government. We no longer have the service that we had before.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Unfortunately, we cannot believe the homelessness statistics provided by the Government. We have known this since the previous Minister's days in charge of the Department. Figures were re-categorised to hide the real and distressing extent of the crisis. We know that the number of adults and children in domestic violence refuges and direct provision centres are not included in official homeless data, despite the fact that this type of accommodation is temporary and the housing crisis is exacerbating access to move-on options.

I have asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to report how many adults and children are in domestic violence refuges in Donegal in each of the years from 2017 to date; to report the number of domestic violence refuge places in Donegal, compared to the recommended number of refuge places; the refuge capacity per county; and plans to increase access across the Island. I have also asked the Minister how many adults and children are in direct provision accommodation in Donegal in each of the years from 2017 to date.

We are due to have 60 new neighbours arriving in Letterkenny soon and I understand that there will be children with these families. I would like to see the families being empowered to shop in the local community and have agency and choice in where they use their food vouchers. It will help for a smoother integration into the local community. The direct provision centre in Letterkenny is self-catering and own-door accommodation, but it is still not secure and permanent housing.

Due to the lack of transparency around social housing waiting lists and homelessness data, I have requested information from the Minister of State's Department. I am looking for a full report on housing and homeless in Donegal, including the number of people who are on the rental accommodation scheme or in receipt of housing assistance payment, HAP. I am also seeking a report on the emergency homeless accommodation in the county, the number and demographics of those accessing this accommodation and the number of people on social housing waiting lists in the county, indicating the type of accommodation and the length of time they are waiting. Any figures supplied in respect of this request will be false, because those who earn over €25,000 per year cannot even get on the social housing list. They have no hope of providing themselves with housing. In Donegal, landlords do not want to be included in the HAP programme, so these people cannot access rented accommodation either. Therefore, there is a crisis right across the board that is affecting people there.

I have also asked about the level of funding provided to Donegal County Council for housing in recent years. This information should be readily available on the Government's website. Everybody should be able to access this information: policymakers, advocates, civil society organisations, Deputies, the media etc. Why is this information not easily accessible? It is important to ask that question.

Earlier this month, Linda Hayden, of the PAC Woman Podcast, held a live podcast panel discussion on the impact of homelessness on health. A theme of the podcast was the huge rise in women experiencing homelessness, particularly young women and Traveller women. Women experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of sexual and physical violence. Over 60% of families experiencing homelessness are single-parent families, usually headed by a woman. What female-specific policies are being implemented by the Minister of State's Department to address this growing trend? Another important point raised in the podcast was how bad consecutive governments have been in implementing strategies. Those in government all love a good photo opportunity and a glossy document, but not the actual implementation of strategies that will make tangible differences to people's lives. That is one of the areas in which this Government, and every government, is significantly lacking.

I have another question. When will people experiencing homelessness, and those working or volunteering in this area, receive their vaccinations? In the first wave of the pandemic, the organisations working with those experiencing homelessness were commended for the low number of cases in hostels and shared accommodation. People were given single rooms, where possible, and an improved type of accommodation for those experiencing homelessness was provided. If this can be done during a pandemic, why can it not be done outside of it? People with addiction issues are more likely to have underlying health conditions and therefore be more vulnerable to Covid-19. Vulnerable and marginalised groups should be prioritised in the allocation of vaccinations, right across the board, including those with underlying conditions.

I would like to commend the *Irish Examiner* journalists, Noel Baker, Ryan O'Rourke and Aoife Moore, for their work in bringing the names and human stories to the horrifying statistics of those dying on our streets. Some 79 people died in our homeless services and on our streets in 2020. That is just the official figure. I note that there has been a move to reduce that figure, because the Minister has said that it has not been reported properly. In the special report in the *Irish Examiner*, the faces and stories behind the deaths of homeless people were reported earlier this week. These three journalists brought some humanity to the victims. There was a report that the Minister of State is seeking to re-categorise homeless figures again. I suggest that it would make more sense for him to re-categorise his thinking on data. If he sees a homeless person on the street as he walks around town to his office or to get a coffee, he should look them in the eye and acknowledge them as he walks by. He should see them, look into their eyes as he passes them, and categorise them as a vulnerable human being with rights, a life, a history and hopefully a future. He can provide the future for them. The role of this Government is to ensure that that happens.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Homelessness falls under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, but the Department of Health and the HSE are responsible for the delivery of a range of health-related services and supports for the homeless. Under health legislation, and the Health Act 1953 in particular, the HSE has a statutory obligation towards homeless persons. This is understood to mean that it has a responsibility in respect of the homeless.

Together with the Minister for Health, I met with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, to agree how dedicated funding and resources can be provided to deliver the necessary health and mental supports required to assist homeless people with complex needs. Within my remit as Minister of State at the Department of Health, I have made the health needs of homeless persons a key priority.

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As the Deputy rightly stated, there are addiction and mental health issues among young people. This is a matter of particular concern to me.

In respect of the vaccination of vulnerable and homeless people, I have engaged with those rolling out the vaccination programme, to ensure that people with addiction issues, the homeless and marginalised are included in the priority groups. I have also highlighted that those who attend addiction services, live in homeless accommodation or are regarded as vulnerable, should fall under certain groups. The Deputy is absolutely correct. We cannot be complacent about the on-paper prioritisation of these vulnerable groups, because there may be unintended barriers to equal access to the vaccines. These barriers could include difficulties in attending designated vaccination centres, a lack of contact with and trust in the health services, vaccine hesitancy due to lack of information and low levels of literacy or language barriers. I am aware of those issues. The vaccination table is a living document. The vaccinations will be taking place over weeks and months and NIAC, NPHET and the HSE will be looking at various cohorts who have not been left out, as such, but where there may be a need to see what criteria they fit into. I thank the Deputy for raising that issue.

Sitting suspended at 11.51 a.m. and resumed at 12 noon.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tá scéal ann inniu go bhfuil sé le fógairt ag NatWest amárach nach mbeidh Ulster Bank ag trádáil níos mó sa mhargadh ina dhiaidh dó a bheith anseo ar feadh 160 bliain. Drochscéal a bheas ann d'oibrithe, don phobal, do ghnáthchustaiméirí agus don gheilleagar ar fud an Stáit. Tá Ulster Bank ar cheann de na hiasachtóirí is mó do mhorgáistí agus do chomhlachtaí beaga agus measartha sa Stát seo. Gan an banc, tá baol ann go mbeidh ardú ar rátaí úis agus go dtiocfaidh lagú ar an ngeilleagar. Má tá deireadh ag teacht le Ulster Bank sa Stát seo caithfidh cinnte a dhéanamh nach dtitfidh iasachtaí isteach i lámha na greach-chistí.

Tomorrow, NatWest will announce the future of Ulster Bank in this State. It has been reported that Ulster Bank is set to leave the market after more than 160 years. If that is to pass, it would be a major hammer blow for workers, communities, mortgage holders and small businesses. Ulster Bank plays a key role in our communities, providing jobs for more than 2,400 people across the State and with 88 branches serving very important communities and more than 1 million customers. It is a major player in our banking sector, responsible for 20% of all SME lending and with a 15% share in the mortgage market. In 2019 alone, it provided €3.1 billion of new lending into our economy. The Deputy Governor of the Central Bank wrote to me back in September and said that the Irish banking sector is already heavily concentrated, with five banks accounting for the majority of mortgage lending and only three banks accounting for the majority of SME lending. Ulster Bank is one of them. The Deputy Governor continued: "Ulster Bank's exit from the market could contribute to an upward pressure on interest rates and weaker credit availability." That is the reality before us.

There has been speculation for months that Cerberus, one of the most aggressive vulture funds in this State, is circling Ulster Bank's entire €20.5 billion loan book. This would be an unacceptable outcome for homeowners and borrowers and it must be avoided at all costs. I have always said that the best scenario is that Ulster Bank remains a part of our banking sector. I hope that is what will come to pass tomorrow. However, if it comes to pass that NatWest

announces Ulster Bank's withdrawal, given its impact on the banking sector, communities, borrowers and, indeed, the economy, there is a responsibility on the Government to act to ensure that all that can be done is done to minimise the damage that would be caused. We could have a €20.5 billion loan book on the line. We cannot allow vulture funds with no interest in our communities, businesses or economy to rip up that loan book.

The State remains a key player in the Irish banking sector, with a 14% stake in Bank of Ireland and a majority shareholding in both AIB and Permanent TSB. The Government must now look at how those pillar banks and Permanent TSB could play a lead role, if the worst comes to pass tomorrow, by offering some degree of security to mortgage holders, businesses, personal customers and workers. Has the Tánaiste spoken to either of the pillar banks or Permanent TSB to track a path forward in the interest of Ulster Bank staff and customers? Does he agree that now is the time to create a third force in the banking sector to challenge AIB and Bank of Ireland? On my request, the finance committee wrote to the Minister for Finance and the Central Bank a number of weeks ago requesting that they take an active role in responding to the possible withdrawal of Ulster Bank from the market? Will the Tánaiste commit to that today?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I am aware of the media reports in regard to the future of Ulster Bank in the Republic of Ireland. This is, as everyone in the House will appreciate, a commercial matter for its owner, NatWest. It will not be a Government decision, nor does it require Government approval. However, it is a matter of real concern and one that the Government is taking very seriously. It is a matter of real concern to Ulster Bank's customers, staff and the communities it serves.

The Minister for Finance has been in close contact with Ulster Bank and its parent, NatWest, in recent days and, indeed, in recent months, and he has kept me informed of developments. He is assessing all options with a view to protecting customers, minimising job losses and avoiding compulsory redundancies where possible, and also reducing the negative impact there could be on competition for banking services in Ireland. It is important to say that in any scenario, people's deposits and savings are fully protected and can be transferred to another bank. Two months' notice must be given to customers of any change or development such as this. When it comes to mortgages and loans, the terms and conditions will remain unchanged and EU consumer protections continue to apply.

In regard to the suggestion that we try to develop a third force in our banking sector that would be able to compete with Bank of Ireland and AIB, this is something that I and the Government support. If it is possible to develop a solution on those lines, that is something we are exploring and want to explore.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Tánaiste. We recognise that there are protections there, including for mortgage holders. However, if these loans fall into the hands of vulture funds, there could, upon review of those mortgages, be significant consequences for borrowers. I also recognise that this is a decision for NatWest and that it is outside the control of Government. However, if the decision is taken tomorrow, which seems to be the direction of travel that this has been on for quite a period of time, there is a responsibility on Government to act, as the Tánaiste says, to protect borrowers, customers and staff, protect the footprint of our banking sector and also protect competition within the sector.

I ask the Tánaiste to ensure that, after tomorrow's decision, there is an immediate engagement with the finance committee and Opposition spokespersons and that the Government lay

before us an options paper as to how we can utilise our majority State-owned shareholding in our banks to try to achieve the objectives which I think everybody in the House shares, namely, to protect customers, business owners, mortgage holders, staff and our banking sector.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I will be speaking to the Minister for Finance about this again today. I am sure he will be willing to engage with Opposition spokespeople and members of the committee on this issue as things develop. I will take that up with him later but I am sure he will be happy to brief spokespeople and engage with the committee.

As the Deputy knows, the Minister has already engaged with representatives from both Ulster Bank and NatWest in recent months. He also met with the Financial Services Union last December, as did I in recent months. When he met with representatives of Ulster Bank last October, he emphasised that he expected that staff representatives would be consulted and kept informed of any developments throughout the review process. I am concerned about the impact that ongoing media speculation is having on staff and customers of the bank. As the Deputy knows, customers, staff and the Central Bank must be informed promptly of any decisions that are made.

On the question of whether other banks in which the State has a shareholding have an interest in elements of Ulster Bank, while I appreciate that this is a pertinent question, I cannot comment on speculation about that as it would be inappropriate to do so for reasons of Stock Exchange market abuse rules. The Central Bank has clear requirements that apply when firms cease operations or transfer operations to another entity. Customers must be informed about those decisions and given at least two months' notice to move to alternative providers. If their loans are transferred, they must be given full details of the arrangements. All mortgages or loans which are sold or assigned to a new creditor will continue to be subject to the terms of the contract entered into by the borrower. If a loan is sold, the relevant Irish and EU consumer protections continue to apply.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I used to believe the Departments of Justice and Health were the most dysfunctional in government for a number of years but the Department of Education has come up on the outside and taken that mantle. This is because of last year's fiasco involving indecisiveness over cancelling the leaving certificate examinations and the debacle over predicted grades. The latter involved school profiles, which had to be removed. The Minister had to apologise to 6,500 students for incorrect grading. The Minister then promised a review of the leaving certificate examinations of 2020. We are still waiting for it. Not even six weeks into 2021, we have had no fewer than three announcements about schools reopening that had to be withdrawn. These were on 7 January, 26 January and earlier this week before the Cabinet. We welcome the fact the Government has taken on board the Labour Party's call for clarity and choice for leaving certificate students but there are still question marks over certainty because of public health advice.

I want to raise a number of issues. Over the next six weeks, students will have to decide whether to sit oral and practical examinations despite great uncertainty over schools reopening. Some people, including those in the unions, are quite rightly asking why, if oral and practical examinations are going ahead, all students cannot do them regardless of whether they are going down the traditional leaving certificate route or the calculated grades route. This type of external assessment would give both teachers and students peace of mind. We in the Labour Party ask the Tánaiste to consider this as a constructive option.

I want to ask the Tánaiste a very specific question about the leaving certificate examinations and the reopening of schools. Given yesterday's announcement regarding the leaving certificate, has the plan been Tony Holohan and NPHEt proofed? It is a very simple question. Given the kite-flying and the commentary by both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil at parliamentary party meetings regarding the reopening of schools, and considering that the meeting of the Cabinet subcommittee on Covid is to be held only this evening, is there any chance that any of what is proposed could be torpedoed because of the Chief Medical Officer and NPHEt doing their jobs and giving advice? I am aware that Ministers, including the Tánaiste and Taoiseach, would often have been upset by letters coming in just before key decisions were to be made. I really want to know the position because we must not have kite-flying. We have to have certainty. Can the Tánaiste guarantee here today that the plans for the leaving certificate examinations and, most important, the plans for the reopening of schools, which were mentioned again on radio by the Minister for Education this morning and by the Taoiseach on Limerick radio, will be implemented because the Government has consulted NPHEt and the CMO, Mr. Tony Holohan, and that they will not be torpedoed?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. Parents and students asked for clarity, choice and some compassion, and that is what we have provided in making the decision yesterday. A decision from the Government gives students the choice to opt for either a calculated grade or an accredited grade, or to sit the traditional examinations, which include written, oral, aural and practical examinations. They can make their choice subject by subject and they can also choose both options, taking whichever grade is highest.

On school reopening, NPHEt has been consulted. It has given us informal advice on what school reopening could look like. It has advised that we should adopt a very gradual approach and that we should not have all 1 million pupils going back on the same day. The advice is that reopening should be done on a gradual basis, perhaps starting with leaving certificate students, because they need to prepare for their examinations, and also the youngest pupils, who are considered to present the lowest risk. These include pupils in junior and senior infants and first class, for example. After reopening, the situation would be assessed for a few weeks to determine whether there is an increase in cases of transmission, for example, and further reopening for more groups and years would occur only thereafter. That is the plan. That is the approach that NPHEt has advised us is most appropriate. This will be discussed again this evening by the Cabinet subcommittee on Covid.

The Deputy asked me the very fair question as to whether we can give a guarantee and certainty. If we have learned anything from the pandemic in the past year, it is that nobody can give a guarantee or offer absolute certainty. We are seeing case numbers coming going down but they are still quite high. There are still 500, 600 or 700 per day. Schools were fully open at those levels back in September and October but we now have the B117 variant, which is much more transmissible. We just cannot say for sure what impact it will have as schools reopen on a phased basis throughout March and April. When schools reopened in September, we did not see a significant increase in cases. We know from other countries that they have managed to keep their schools open or bring pupils back but it would not be responsible for me to use the words "certainty" and "guarantee". That is why the advice from our scientists and public health doctors is not to bring back pupils all at the same time but to do so gradually, with some years going back first, followed by an assessment after two or three weeks. It is only then that the green light would be given for more classes or years to go back.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I have two points. Will the Tánaiste take on board the request of the

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Labour Party for both sets of students to have oral and practical examinations? That would assuage many concerns, particularly those of unions. It is a request. The Tánaiste might come back to me on that.

I realise there is no certainty with Covid. I really do not have an issue with the Tánaiste saying he cannot offer a guarantee. I was not trying to put words in his mouth but the issue for me is that there is genuine concern. Why kite-fly 1 March? Why not have the meeting of the subcommittee tonight? Why not come back next week or later this week and say what the Government is doing? The Cabinet subcommittee on Covid, with Dr. Holohan and NPHE, is meeting tonight. After that, the Government should make the decisions. Why have a Taoiseach and Minister on radio, a Minister on the television and two live-streamed parliamentary party meetings all making reference to preparing for 1 March? Everyone is hanging on everyone's words. When will the Tánaiste tell us when the Government will make a decision that everyone, including parents and students, can plan for rather than saying the date will be 1 March? I respect the fact the Tánaiste cannot give certainty but I do not respect the timeline.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. We will certainly take on board the suggestion and request from the Labour Party on a hybrid option but I understand there are some difficulties with it. One reason we want to have the calculated grade or accredited grade system is in case, for some reason, schools close again and oral, aural and practical examinations cannot go ahead. I am not saying they will close again. Having two systems, with the examinations and accredited grades, at least allows us to know that if things go wrong, there will still be accredited grades. If oral, aural and practical examinations are worked into those accredited grades, there may be a problem with accredited grades in the event of schools having to close again. That is the thinking behind it. Maybe it is possible to have three parallel systems of assessing students. We will take that up with the Department of Education and the Minister.

On dates, I have never used the date 1 March. I appreciate that others may have. What I have said is what I have said here.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Tánaiste is representing the Government now.

The Tánaiste: I have referred here in the Dáil to the plan. The plan for quite some time has been for the phased reopening of schools, starting with the opening of special schools, which has been done, and moving on to special classes. Across the period of March and April, the plan is to open schools on a phased basis. I totally appreciate that what parents want is a clear plan and clear message. We will have that in the next few days.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I want to take up a question that the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, Deputy Connolly, raised yesterday, namely, the question of the destruction of the files from the commission on mother and baby homes. I am sure the Tánaiste and everybody else in the House is aware of this because everybody will have received emails about it from the survivors and their representatives. I am making a plea to the Tánaiste, in his capacity as a representative of the Government, to find a way to do something to extend the lifetime of the commission beyond 28 February. He will be receiving emails asking him to do this. The reason is that the survivors and their representatives believe - much of legal advice is to this effect - that if the commission closes down on 28 February, there will be no prospect that it will be able to go after the files containing the 550 oral testimonies that we are told have been destroyed. I note that since yesterday's challenge by Deputy Connolly, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, says he will make further inquiries as to whether the files have been absolutely destroyed or can be retrieved in

some way or another. It is hugely important that he said that, but if it cannot be done or he cannot guarantee it will be done before 28 February, there is one thing the Government could do, namely, to bring an amendment to the 2020 Act we passed before Christmas, section 7 of which would allow the Government to extend the lifetime of the commission beyond 28 February. There is no other way it can be done.

Prior to the introduction of the Act, the commission was extended five or six times just because the Government was asked to do so. It did so on behalf of the commission looking for more time. The survivors are now asking for it and I am pleading with the Tánaiste to do his best to get this done. I have no doubt that not a single Deputy or party in this House will stand in the way of it happening. As was eloquently put by Deputy Connolly yesterday, we have let them down throughout the history of this State, we have let them down with the commission report and we have let them down massively by destroying their oral records without their permission. Can we please do this one thing for them and extend the lifetime of the commission to allow investigation into what happened to those precious records?

Over Christmas, I found an old tape of a conversation between me and my ma 20 years ago, and I immediately got it digitised for her anniversary, which was just after Christmas. Those recordings are precious to those who know the people and to us as a society because of what went on in the mother and baby homes and the disparity between what was recorded and what was transcribed. Many witnesses, like Noelle Brown, have said the transcript does not represent their testimony. We need to get those recordings back. If we cannot do it before 28 February, will the Government please amend the Act?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. We will certainly try to do the right thing by the survivors, taking into account all the issues at play. I think the commission did a good job. It did what it was asked to do, in many ways. It spent five years examining all the documentary evidence, spoke to lots of people who spent time or worked in mother and baby institutions and did its best to come up with a report to a legal standard as to what could and could not be proven and what was and was not said.

I do not want anything I say to be seen in any way as a criticism of the people who did the report because they did a good job within the confines of the Commissions of Investigation Act, but I think there are some big flaws. One big flaw is the fact that when the commission reports, it reports. It is almost left then to the Government to explain the report, even though it was not the Government's report. I watched the documentary recently on the institutional abuse that occurred in industrial schools that was on TV. People may have seen it. One of the differences that time was that Mr. Justice Séan Ryan and the people who did that report were able to go out, explain it and answer questions. That has fallen to the Government on this occasion, even though it is not our report. That is a flaw.

A second flaw is that many survivors did not get the opportunity to tell their story in public the way they wanted to. Many survivors want to remain private and that is their choice, but there are others who, I believe, would have liked to have had a public forum where their story could be heard and recorded as a truth-telling exercise. Unfortunately, that is not how it was set up. Maybe it is still possible to do that. The former Minister, Katherine Zappone, and I had started work on that in the period of the previous Government.

On the call for the timeframe to be extended, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, is aware of the concerns about the audio recordings made by the confidential committee as an aid to its

work. The module was created to facilitate people to provide accounts of their deeply personal experiences in complete confidence and as informally as possible in the circumstances with a view to providing a report of a general nature. The Minister is liaising closely with the commission of investigation and the Data Protection Commissioner, DPC, to ensure these matters can be appropriately addressed by the commission. He is committed to having robust processes in place for the management of the archive when it transfers prior to the end of this month. He is open to exploring all avenues that would best serve the interests of survivors. However, at this point it is his view that the additional time would not assist in any way.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I will not comment on what I think of the report of the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes, whether it is good or bad or what the problems with it are. That is not what I am here today to try to do. I am here to best represent the interests of the survivors who have been pleading with all of us. I doubt there is a Deputy in the House or a Senator in the other House who has not received tons of emails asking us to do our best to ensure the allegedly destroyed files are not destroyed. It is not all about publicly telling one's story. It is also about having the historic record and having the story told correctly and accurately. People like Noelle Brown who gave testimony say their testimony, as they spoke it, is not reflected in the final report. I will not say anything about judging that or not judging it, other than it is not right. The more harm we do to these survivors, the more we do not listen to them and the more we pile hurt, pain and disrespect upon them, then the more disrespect we will gain from it. As a Parliament, we need to address this. I ask the Tánaiste again, if it is the case that these files cannot be retrieved or definite information of their retrievability cannot be given before the end of this month, will the Government bring forward an amendment to the 2020 Act that will allow all of us in this House support it to save the files for investigation?

The Tánaiste: I cannot make that commitment here but I will take up the matter again with the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman. I do not know if it is possible to retrieve the audio recordings. Knowing the answer to that would be crucial at this point. The commission has said that each witness at the confidential committee was given a guarantee of complete anonymity, and for this reason the tapes were deleted. Recordings, the commission says, were used as an aid to create thematic records of each person's account, from which the final content was produced and published in the confidential committee report. The commission has repeatedly said that this process and the associated actions were carried out with the knowledge of survivors, although it is clear that many survivors do not share this view. I respect that and the Minister has been examining these matters closely. He has engaged with the commission itself as well as the Data Protection Commission, DPC, and the Attorney General on the matter. The possibility of an extension raises legal questions and has implications for the operation of future commissions. If the commission were to be extended while the archive was transferred to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, it is difficult to see how the DPC could carry out a proper investigation. To leave the archive with the commission would mean that it remains the data controller and would respond to subject access requests, bearing in mind that it has always refused to give these up until now. It would be responsible for the exercise of the right to rectification.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I return to the issue of antigen testing, which I have raised several times with the Tánaiste. The European Commission has advocated the use of antigen testing. The Irish Government said "No" and that it was not good enough to take up the 20 million antigen tests offered by the European Commission. It was not good enough to facilitate visits to nursing homes. It was not good enough to facilitate the return to schools or to make

schools safer. Lo and behold, we woke up on Monday morning to find out that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is facilitating the antigen testing of workers in meat plants. Such workers operate under bonded labour, effectively, because the Tánaiste's Department will not change the work permit system.

I do not disagree with the decision to facilitate antigen testing in meat plants by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine but, if it is good enough for this sector, why is it not good enough for others? My question is not about the decision. I do not disagree with the decision. How are decisions made by the Government? It is strange that it could not be looked at for every other sector, but when Larry and the lads rock up, it is, "Yes, sir; no, sir; three bags full, sir." On what possible basis is the Government making decisions around antigen testing, particularly given that the EU Health Security Committee has agreed today common standards across the EU, common data to be shared and common data to be included in results? If every other country in the EU thinks it is safe to use antigen testing, not as an alternative to PCR testing or for a clinical diagnosis but to get society back functioning, what is the obstacle in Ireland?

The second thing I will raise is a follow-on from a previous question, which I believe I can do, and it is in regard to banks. Bank of Ireland has announced it is going to close 83 branches. We know what those branches will be because three of them are in my own county. They are the branches that were closed and reopened in a limited capacity following the previous lockdown. The State still has a 14% shareholding in Bank of Ireland. We bailed out Bank of Ireland, and now it is bailing out on us. It will result in elderly people, in particular, receiving a reduced service and businesses receiving similar. At the same time that is happening, various Departments hold their accounts with Bank of Ireland. As I said, there is a 14% State shareholding in Bank of Ireland.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, it is one issue and one question.

Deputy Michael McNamara: But I think I can follow up on a previous question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Whatever the Deputy thinks, that is not the case.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Okay. I am sure the Tánaiste can respond if he wishes, given that his Department specifically deals with the banks daily. He is well acquainted with the issue of antigen testing should he choose to reply.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for his questions. I support the greater use of antigen testing in Ireland. I am on the record as having said that on a number of occasions. However, that has to be subject to public health advice and the approval of NPHET and HIQA, which also advises on this.

It is now being used in outbreaks and has been tested in some clinical scenarios, such as outbreaks in hospitals. It has, therefore, been used in recent weeks under direction of NPHET and the HSE. The problem is that it misses a large number of positive cases, particularly asymptomatic cases. Therefore, whereas a PCR test might miss 15% or 20% of positives, an antigen test will miss many more positives, especially asymptomatic cases. That could give a false reassurance. People can believe they have tested negative for Covid-19 and can behave in a certain way that actually causes the virus to spread. That is one of the big concerns about using antigen testing more so than we do now. It can create a false reassurance that people have tested negative when they actually have not. There is a very high risk that positives get missed on antigen testing.

For what it is worth, the first I heard about meat plants was from the media. It may well be that the meat plant owners have taken it upon themselves to do this. People around the country are carrying out antigen tests and even PCR tests without approval or guidance from the public authorities. There are private labs, for example, from which a person can get self-tests and so on. People can order others from the Internet. I do not know for sure but it may well be the case, and I suspect it probably is, that the meat plants took it upon themselves to use antigen testing and that was not done with the approval or authority of any public body. I could be wrong on that but I suspect that is the case.

To clarify once again, NPHE has endorsed the recommendations on the use of antigen testing. As I mentioned previously, the HSE is now putting in place deployment options for the use in acute hospital settings and as part of a response to outbreaks in community settings. The use will be in symptomatic vulnerable populations and their close contacts, supported by appropriate clinical governance and operational arrangements.

The Minister for Health has set up a group that is chaired by the chief scientific adviser, Professor Mark Ferguson, to examine the use of rapid tests in the community. Therefore, things are moving, albeit at a slow pace, in regard to greater use of antigen testing. It will now be used in symptomatic vulnerable populations and their close contacts. The group, under Professor Ferguson, will see if it can be used more widely in a community setting.

The Deputy also mentioned Bank of Ireland. It is the case that the Government holds a 15% shareholding in Bank of Ireland. However, 85% of it is owned by other investors. The decision to close any branches is obviously one for the bank. It is not a decision for Government nor one that requires Government approval. While nobody likes to see a bank branch being closed, we all need to acknowledge that the world has moved on in terms of banking. The number of people who set foot in a bank branch now is a fraction of what it was ten or 20 years ago. We need to think about how we can use these iconic buildings, which are often in villages and main streets, for a new purpose that will involve footfall.

Deputy Michael McNamara: This false positive and reassurance is a bit like the argument against giving out condoms during the HIV pandemic, that people would feel reassured and behave on that basis. Frankly, I do not buy it. Every single person who is detected is somebody who would not otherwise be detected. It is not that we are taking people away from PCR testing to antigen testing; it is in addition to it. It is a screening process. Therefore, I simply do not accept that argument. I can see that Deputy Kelly, who I know has also been vocal on antigen testing, agrees with me on this particular point.

With regard to the banks, the shareholding is one thing but Departments have huge bank accounts. There was once a time when the Tánaiste said not another red cent. How about not lodging another red cent in bank accounts owned by Departments if this is what they are doing? There is a generation for whom this will not matter. Equally, there is a generation of people for whom it will matter hugely. Businesses across main streets in Miltown Malbay, Kilkee and Tulla will be adversely affected.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Just before the Tánaiste answers, Deputies may raise one issue. To be fair to you, Deputy, the Tánaiste did answer you, but it is setting a precedent for Leaders' Questions.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I was following up on the Tánaiste's response.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I understand that. There is no fault on you on this occasion. It is one issue.

The Tánaiste: Nobody likes to see a bank branch close in a town. We need to be honest and realistic, however. The world has moved on. The number of people who go into a bank branch now is a fraction of what it was ten or 20 years ago, and the number will keep falling. Most purchases in Ireland now are happening electronically. Even places where a person could not use a card before and where they only took cash, they sometimes now only take a card. Older people, by and large, have adopted and adapted to that change in technology, much more so than many people give them credit for. That is the truth of the way in which the world is moved on.

I represent a constituency with 120,000 or 130,000 people. There are two, perhaps three, banks in the entire constituency. It is not that people travel to other parts of Dublin or other parts of Meath or Louth to use those branches. People are managing money in a totally different way and-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: Is there one within 5 km of everybody?

The Tánaiste: Certainly not, no.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sorry, Tánaiste. The time is up now.

The Tánaiste: We need to be honest with people about that. One thing I saw last year and was really impressed with-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tánaiste, we are over time.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy should have a look at one of the old banks in Edgeworthstown and how that has been turned into an enterprise hub.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: For clarity, because it puts the Leas-Cheann Comhairle in a difficult position, it is one question, one issue. The Tánaiste has chosen to answer the second issue, so the antigen test question has not been answered, and we will just leave it like that. I am moving on now to Questions on Promised Legislation.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask for the co-operation of Deputies because there is a long list, and we hope we will get through it. We will start with Sinn Féin. I call Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Yesterday, during Leaders' Questions, an Teachta McDonald raised with the Taoiseach the issue of family carers and the failure to set out a specific place for them in the Covid-19 vaccination programme given the vital front-line care they provide. We in this House know that family carers look after vulnerable loved ones with compassion and love. Their value is immeasurable.

In response to Deputy McDonald, the Taoiseach said that the Minister for Health had written to the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, regarding a re-examination of the sequencing of vaccination, and it was his understanding that NIAC would be responding to that query last night. Has it done so? Will family carers now be afforded clarity regarding their place on the Covid-19 vaccination programme?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I checked before I came into the House and, to the best of my knowledge, NIAC has not yet come back to us on that matter. It is under consideration, however. As we move down the list to more and more groups of people, we have asked NIAC to give consideration to groups that could be prioritised, not just family carers but also people under 70 who may have a medical condition, transplant patients, people who are immunosuppressed, cancer patients and people with cystic fibrosis. There are, therefore, a number of groups we have asked NIAC to give consideration to. As of this morning, it had not come back to us about it. Perhaps it came back to the Minister for Health and it did not get to me, but we will let people know as soon as we can.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I welcome from the Tánaiste's live-streamed parliamentary party meeting yesterday the fact he is taking on board what I brought up ten months ago regarding compensating front-line workers. I am glad he has agreed with that.

I want to raise a specific issue with the Tánaiste regarding mass vaccination clinics and who will do the work. Nurse on Call has put out the pay rates it has been offered to hire people in to do vaccinations in these clinics. Frankly speaking, looking at the rates, the take-home pay for many would be around the minimum wage. A number of people who are qualified to do this work, that is, retired nurses and other qualified people, have told me they are not now going to do the work in the vaccination centres. It would make more sense for them to continue to work for one day per week in some other facility. We could have a real issue with this. Like with the student nurses, why are we going out for this most important HR solution for vaccinations and not paying people a decent wage for the length of time it will take?

The Tánaiste: I do not have any detail on the different pay rates being offered to people who will be working in the vaccination centres, but like I said, we will have a subcommittee on Covid this afternoon and I will take that up with the HSE then.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I want to follow up on the question from Deputy Bríd Smith on the mother and baby homes commission. On the one hand, the Tánaiste said the Government knows there is a flaw in the system and that once these commissions hand over their reports they dissolve and the Government is left answering questions for them. On the other hand, the Tánaiste is saying he will not extend the commission. It is within the remit of the Government to change that legislation, to change the date and to extend that commission. The Social Democrats have drafted a Bill to that effect and we would love it if the Government would support it. Otherwise, the Government should bring in its own legislation and we will support that but it is important that it is done. Everyone acknowledges that, in October, the Government completely mishandled the legislation on the mother and baby homes issue. It is walking back into the exact same situation again in which survivors will be let down.

The Tánaiste: I am not saying we will not extend it. I am saying that the Minister is giving that consideration. If we do extend it, we want to know that it will serve a purpose and help us solve the problem that has arisen around deleted audio recordings. We do not know if they are recoverable and an answer to that question would be helpful.

Deputy Bríd Smith: There seems to be a push to get all the kids back to school and it is understandable that people want that. It was said in yesterday's *Irish Independent* that it has figures that show that the cohort of people next most susceptible to Covid during the third wave are young people, from ages 16 to 18, and so reopening the schools has huge implications. Has the Government ensured that the work was done to make our schools safe? I mention the size

of the classrooms. Have we acquired more spaces so that children and young people can be spaced out further away from each other? Have we employed more teachers so that we can guarantee that the class sizes are smaller? Have we dealt with the question of ventilation in the classroom? We are told that 80% of our schools have poor ventilation and we have had nine months or, arguably, a whole year to do this work. How much of it has been done?

The Tánaiste: A lot of extra staff have been hired and a lot of resources have been provided to schools to adapt to Covid by purchasing screens, sanitisers and all of those things. A lot has been done in that regard. The advice we have from NPHET and our public health doctors and scientists is that schools are safe places but no place is 100% safe. Any place in which people are going to interact carries a certain risk. We have to bear in mind, however, the high risk of denying children and young adults their education, the opportunity to meet other young people and the opportunity to develop. We have to bear that in mind in any decisions that we make. The World Health Organization has been strong on that matter too. It strongly argues that the last thing that should be done is to close schools and the first places to be opened are schools because of the wider benefits of that.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I am looking for the Government to intervene on promised legislation. In the programme for Government, the Central Bank (Amendment) Bill 2018 is due for pre-legislative scrutiny in the autumn. Will the Tánaiste give an update on this Bill? The reason I am looking for this update is due to the fact that many of the main banks are renegeing on loan approvals for PAYE workers whose employers avail of the Government's temporary wage subsidy scheme. It will be disgraceful if banks are allowed to get away with this. Many of these workers are in desperate need of a home for themselves, and in many cases, their families. They have done everything that was asked of them. They have saved for their deposits, paid their deposits, got their loan approvals in principle and it is just when they are ready to close that they are told by the banks that their loan approvals are no longer valid. I have spoken to people in Dundalk and there is a real anger about this. We all know the banks received help when they needed it and the taxpayers of this country are still paying a heavy price. I am asking the Tánaiste and his Government to intervene. I know the Tánaiste is meeting the Minister for Finance today-----

The Tánaiste: I am told there is no date yet for that Bill but I will take up the matter with the Minister for Finance today when I speak to him. We need to be frank and honest with people. Banks have a responsibility to engage in prudent lending and they should only lend money to people or businesses where there is a reasonable confidence that they will be able to pay it back. The Deputy talked about the banks being helped out in the past and the reason they had to be helped out or bailed out in the past was because they lent a lot of money to a lot of people and businesses that could not pay it back. It is not in anyone's interest for us to have a repeat of that. Because people have lost their jobs and because so many people have seen their incomes fall, the truth is that there are people who might have been able to service a loan a year ago who might not be able to now or in a year's time. We need to be honest with people about these things.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There are almost 30,000 families, homes, businesses and schools waiting for broadband in Tipperary, according to National Broadband Ireland, NBI. A recent response I got to a parliamentary question told me that there were 8,000 surveyed in Tipperary, which means that 21,000 were not surveyed. These people are trying to work, do business, get education, pursue leisure and do everything, so when will the roll-out of broadband be accelerated? The Tánaiste mentioned the banks and so on doing business online now, but the Govern-

ment is not thinking about people in rural Ireland who cannot access broadband and who have no idea when they will be able to access it. We are talking about a four-year roll-out. When will it be accelerated for these people to be able to work from home like the Tánaiste says people can in Dublin? The Tánaiste is fortunate with that in his constituency but people in rural Ireland are entitled to fair play as well.

The Tánaiste: Most people do their banking online and they do it on their phones, and one does not need broadband for that. If the Deputy asks around in his constituency and community, people will tell him they mainly do their banking on their phones. Leaving that aside, I will meet NBI in the coming weeks to discuss the acceleration of the national broadband plan. As the Deputy knows, this is a huge investment of €3 billion in rural Ireland. A contract was signed by the previous Government and was opposed by most other Members of this House. I am glad they no longer oppose it and that they want it to be accelerated. That is exactly what I will be talking to the company about. It involves 100,000 homes, farms and businesses being connected every year for the next six or seven years. If it can be speeded up, it will be speeded up. The political will and the money are there to do it but I understand this is a huge technical operation and it can only be done as quickly as it can be done.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I want to go back over the exchange the Tánaiste had on Ulster Bank during Leader's Questions and the difficulties that will happen tomorrow when NatWest announces its decision on Ulster Bank. It is vitally important that Ulster Bank is maintained to generate that third force within the banking industry in Ireland. The Minister for Finance is not an innocent bystander in this. We own a 75% stake in Permanent TSB so we can go in and say that we can take over the retail responsibilities of the bank and provide that third force. We should be putting that up to Ulster Bank or NatWest to make sure that is within their consideration, and that is vitally important. I would ask that the Tánaiste would ask the Minister for Finance to make sure that is done so that we can manage our own move away from the banking system.

The Tánaiste: As I said earlier on, the development of a third banking force that is able to compete with Bank of Ireland and Allied Irish Banks, AIB, would be welcome. It is something the Government would support but any decision on Ulster Bank will be a commercial decision for NatWest. With anything we do in trying to put together a third or a new banking force, we would have to make sure that entity would be successful, viable, profitable and in a position to compete with Bank of Ireland and AIB. That would mean taking on the strong aspects. We would not want to set up a third banking force to fail. We would want to make sure we get it right.

Deputy Michael Collins: Millions of euro is after being spent in Bandon on water and sewerage infrastructure but serious questions have to be asked of Irish Water as sewage is entering some properties on the New Road area in Bandon in recent weeks, especially over the past weekend. I have spoken to residents who are to say the least angry to have their homes destroyed by sewage. It looks like pipes laid are the wrong size and urgent works are required to remedy this mess. There is likely that the untreated raw sewage will also enter the Bridewell river in Bandon. All this is extremely concerning for the people of Bandon whose businesses have been shockingly disrupted for a number of years. This water and sewerage scheme needs to get done urgently and properly, and get business and residents' lives back to some kind of normality after years of disruption. Will the Tánaiste personally intervene on this urgent matter with Irish Water or the Minister to help save these homes in Bandon from being destroyed with raw sewage again?

The Tánaiste: I am very sorry to hear what people in Bandon are experiencing. I visited after floods a couple of years ago and spoke to many of the business people and residents. The flood works that have happened there have produced some benefits but the problems are far from resolved. I will certainly undertake to inform the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, that this was raised here in the Chamber today and ask him or Irish Water to come back to the Deputy with more information.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Once again, I would like to bring up the issue of the acceleration of the national broadband plan. I welcome the Government commitment in relation to this. I had a meeting with National Broadband Ireland, NBI. It dealt with a number of issues that it said were probably hampering the acceleration. One of the issues relates to Safe Pass. In fairness, I dealt with this on Thursday last here. It looks like that issue has been dealt with. That was impacting on contractors coming in.

There is a different formation of planning permission permits that the company is looking for. At times, the company will have a plan, there be a change of a pole and then suddenly the company has to put in fresh application that could hold it up, whether by Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, or the local authority, anywhere between two days and eight weeks. That is something we need sorted. It possibly needs a moratorium on the tree-trimming ban.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I was second on the list yesterday. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle took down my name. Members have stood up here today who were behind me on the list yesterday. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae was first. I was second on that list. I was here at 9.30 a.m. Nine of us stood in a queue yesterday and Members have spoken before me.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is using up time. I am going through a list here. If there has been a mistake, we will make it up to the Deputy at some point. Please resume your seat. This is 30 minutes where I meticulously go through a list that is front of me. If I could have the Deputy's co-operation, I would appreciate that. I call Deputy Carthy on the same issue. The next Member on the same issue will be Deputy Bruton, and then Deputy McNamara.

Deputy Matt Carthy: On the national broadband plan, the Tánaiste this morning directed people who wanted to find out when it is estimated that they will be connected to the national broadband to a page on the Fine Gael website. I would like to ask the Tánaiste if he or his party have consulted with the Data Protection Commissioner as to the legality of this. This is clearly a data harvesting project on the part of Fine Gael. They are using information that is freely available on a public website - a website that the taxpayers pay for - and yet, on the Fine Gael website, there is information being sought that is not necessarily-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----on the NBI website and there is an obligation to sign up to receive information from Fine Gael. I would like to ask the Tánaiste if he has asserted to the legality of the Fine Gael actions.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If Deputy Carthy will not co-operate, I do not mind. I am sitting in the Chair doing my best. The Deputy is allowed contribute briefly and if he speaks for a longer time, other Deputies are deprived.

Deputy Richard Bruton: On the same issue, I congratulate the Tánaiste for the vision in bringing forward this plan in the teeth of opposition from many quarters, including the party

who has just spoken. These visionary projects are hard to get through. Can the Tánaiste give an indication that the NDP and new economic plan will represent a watershed where we will see a similar visionary position taken on offshore renewable energy, on land use, on forestry and on the potential ICT revolution that the broadband plan can trigger?

Deputy Michael McNamara: There are other people waiting for the national broadband plan to be connected. Among those, there is a smaller cohort who are just a half a kilometre down the road from where the existing Eir connection ends. Is there anything as part of the plan that can be done to incentivise Eir or other providers to take in a group, within, what I accept is, another half a kilometre, when a sizeable number of people can be connected for a very small amount of infrastructural outlay?

The Tánaiste: I, once again, warmly welcome the absolute 180° U-turn by Sinn Féin and other parties when it comes to the national broadband plan. This was opposed tooth and nail when we signed that contract in 2019 and now nobody wants to cancel it. We had all the usual conspiracy theories and all the rest of it about how the contract came about and who got it and why, and how somehow things could be done quicker and cheaper, but they could not say how. I welcome the fact that Sinn Féin has now totally U-turned on this and is now a supporter of the national broadband plan which it opposed tooth and nail in 2019.

The Deputies asked many good questions and very technical questions about how we can speed up the NBP. As I said, the money is there. The political will is there. I understand there are technical difficulties because it is such a big project. In my capacity as Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, I will meet NBI. I will see what might be done to speed it up and I will take on board the matters that the Deputies have raised in that regard.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I want to, again, raise the issue of the Educate Together secondary school on the Mill Road in east Meath and the Department's plans to move it temporarily for a third time. The current site was specifically chosen to cater for the massive growth in population in the east Meath area and the parents are adamant that they will not be moved again. There is ample land on the current site to expand and if the Department was not using Google Maps and carried out an on-site inspection, it would see that clearly. At this stage, because we have not heard a peep from the Minister, would the Tánaiste request that the Department make contact and arrange a meeting between the Department, Meath County Council, Educate Together and the Minister to resolve this matter-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Imelda Munster: -----and request that the Department carry out an on-site-----

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

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Munster. The Deputy raised this issue last week or the week before. On foot of that, I have written to the Minister, Deputy Foley, and have asked her to take up the matter directly with the Deputy. I do not know the details of the school project but it is important that proper consultation happens with all of the people affected.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I would also like to raise the issue about Covid-19 vaccines for family carers. Carers who work for the HSE and private providers will be a priority. However, the State equally depends on family carers but the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, stated that family carers are not seen as a distinct cohort. This was very hurtful to family carers. They

care 24-7 with no days off, no breaks, no shift changes and little rest. I have been contacted by many courageous family carers, such as Ms Jane Johnson from Wexford, a loving mother with two sons with special needs, who said, “It is time to embrace their diversity.” Family carers feel that they are on the outskirts of society and unseen and unvalued. Family carers are very concerned about who will take on their caring duties should they themselves have to isolate. We are told that the allocation groups can be revised and re-examined. I would appeal to the Government to start seeing and valuing family carers in giving them equal status as their fellow carers in priority 2.

The Tánaiste: As I mentioned earlier, we have asked the national immunisation advisory council to consider that and to give us advice as to whether we could prioritise family carers, for the reasons that the Deputy said, but not just them. We have asked it to consider other groups too, such as those with cystic fibrosis, CF, and people who are immunocompromised, for example, people who have transplants.

It would be remiss of me not to raise my concerns here about the commemoration being organised by Sinn Féin in Wexford, in the Deputy’s constituency, in relation to the Edward O’Brien bus bomb. This is a deeply offensive commemoration.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: The family do not support it and our Defence Forces-----

Deputy David Cullinane: This is a disgraceful abuse of the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste. I would ask him for his co-operation.

The Tánaiste: Our Defence Forces would be particularly offended that the term “Óglaigh na h-Éireann” is being used in relation to this.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am trying my best to keep the time.

The Tánaiste: I call on Sinn Féin to disassociate itself from the commemoration, to call for it to be cancelled-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am moving on. I call Deputy Clarke.

The Tánaiste: -----and to condemn the violent crime which this bus bomb was.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Last April, in-person assessments for the primary medical certificate ceased because of Covid-19 restrictions.

1 o'clock

While everyone could see the need for that at the time, we now need a clear plan to address the backlog in assessments. The Tánaiste has spoken about being frank and honest with people when it comes to their local banks closing down. Will he be frank and honest with these people, who have severe and permanent disabilities, and say whether all steps in the recruitment of new staff will be taken to ensure these assessments happen in the shortest time possible?

Deputy Pauline Tully: Due to the suspension of primary medical certificate assessments in the second half of last year and their reinstatement just last month, approximately 1,500 people are now on the waiting list for an assessment. Alleviating this backlog could be achieved by in-

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creasing on a temporary basis the number of medical officers in the HSE to assess applications. However, I believe that current medical officers are now engaged in the vaccine roll-out and are not performing assessments, which will lead to further delays. Many of the people who are waiting will be prisoners in their own homes until they receive their assessments and can access the disabled drivers and passengers scheme. This situation is restricting their independence and can have a negative impact on their mental health.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I have written to the Minister about conducting a walkability audit and ensuring that correct disability parking spaces are installed-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This is not on the same issue.

Deputy Thomas Gould: -----rather than just parking spaces with disability signs. We wrote to the Minister seeking for him to provide funding so that a walkability audit could be carried out on behalf of people with different types of disability and limited mobility in Cork city, but it should be done in every constituency.

The Tánaiste: I appreciate that the backlog in primary medical certificate assessments is causing a great deal of distress for hundreds of people across the country. It has been raised with my constituency office as well. I will make contact with the HSE to see if anything can be done to speed up matters. It is important that the assessments be done.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As Deputy Bruton has already spoken, I will call Deputy Cullinane.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I do not believe my question was answered.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I can do nothing about that for the Deputy. He will have to take the matter up-----

Deputy Richard Bruton: My question was not answered.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am sorry, but I am moving on to Deputy Cullinane.

Deputy David Cullinane: For the record, when Deputy Bruton was a Minister, he answered all of our questions.

The Tánaiste: Let me just say-----

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies, please. The clock is running.

Deputy David Cullinane: I wish to raise the issue of a university for the south east. A number of meetings are taking place with Oireachtas Members from Waterford, the local chamber of commerce and a campaign group in Waterford. I raised this issue with the Tánaiste last week and I will repeat what I said then. It is important that this project be delivered, and I want it to be delivered as quickly as possible, but it has to be consistent with national policy and the national planning framework. Under national policy, Waterford city has to be the catalyst for economic growth. In that context, it is important that the headquarters of the new university be located in Waterford as a university city. Will the Government make a clear commitment to

take this issue off the table and ensure we can return to focusing on the necessary capital investment and making the university real?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I also wish to discuss the technological university for the south east. Speaking as a proud Carlow woman, where we have two excellent institutes of technology, those being, Carlow College, St. Patrick's, and Institute of Technology Carlow, we are delighted with the proposed technological university, but we also believe that we should have the headquarters. I do not want this to be a contest between Waterford and Carlow. We must first ensure that we get the technological university, which we are told will happen in January 2022. That is huge. We should all then play our part and look for a headquarters. Like other Deputies, I will be fighting for Carlow and Kilkenny.

The Tánaiste: I am a great supporter of a technological university for the south east. One of my regrets as Taoiseach in the previous Government is that this is one of the measures we did not get over the line. I am determined that we will get it done and up and running in 2022. While I am strongly of the view that it should be centred in Waterford city and we should use some available sites there to expand the university further, it would be a shame if it got delayed or caught up in a row over where the president's office is or where the headquarters should be. One reason the Munster Technological University and Technological University Dublin have gone ahead is because of the disputes between the various campuses in the south east, which have held up the project. That is a shame. Instead of looking for reasons for rows between Carlow and Waterford and perhaps Kilkenny and Wexford, the best thing we can do for the people of the south east is to set up this technological university as soon as we can and deliver its benefits to the region.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The national and international communities are rightly concerned about Covid. Long may that level of concern continue. However, another issue is emerging across the globe, that of the suppression of human rights. All over Africa, the activities of Boko Haram have become evident. There have been instances of genocide and ethnic cleansing. In Russia, there has been the imprisonment of a main opposition leader. This morning, we heard about the imprisonment of an Irish businessman in China. Lastly, Princess Latifa has been confined and all of the personal freedoms she would have in any democracy have been ignored. Is it now time to ask the EU and the UN to focus on these issues before they become accepted as the norm?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising these issues. My colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, has done a great deal of work on the case of Mr. Richard O'Halloran and in trying to assist that gentleman and his family. The issues the Deputy raised in respect of others who may be detained are pertinent and ones in which the Government takes an interest. Perhaps the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence may wish to take an interest in them as well.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Tánaiste.

Deputy Chris Andrews: It has been stressed all along that priority would be given to children with additional needs who attend mainstream schools, yet there was no mention of their inclusion in last night's announcement of a possible return to school on 1 March. Will the Tánaiste assure the House that children with additional needs in mainstream schools will return on 1 March?

The Tánaiste: To be clear, there is no date set or agreed as yet. What is being planned for is a phased return of schools across March and into the Easter period, starting with sixth years and the youngest years in primary school. That would also include special schools and special classes that are 50% back being back 100%, as they should be.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Taxi drivers received an extension to the ten-year age limit rule last year in light of the pandemic and its continuing impact on the industry. The extension was necessary and welcome. Taxi drivers understood the measure was being further extended to the end of 2021 but it now appears that, instead of being extended further, the measure was replicated. In effect, they could benefit from a one-year extension and then that was it. The implication is twofold. Drivers who have made little or no money in the past 12 months but whose cars fell for renewal last year must now replace their cars. They are also being denied the €150 waiver in respect of the suitability test. Will the Tánaiste engage with the Minister for Transport on these issues, please?

The Tánaiste: I will take them up with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. Taxi drivers have suffered more than most in this pandemic. They have experienced a significant loss of income and their vehicles have not been used much in the past year or so. The Deputy's suggestions make sense and I will take them up with the Minister.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste for his co-operation. I have five or six Deputies offering. Some have spoken already, so they are off the list. If Deputies co-operate and take just 30 to 40 seconds for each of their questions, I will get through everyone on the list who has been waiting. We are out of time and I am dependent on Deputies' co-operation.

Deputy Martin Browne: There are full-time paramedics with the National Ambulance Service Representative Association, NASRA, who have been demanding for nearly a decade the right to be represented by a recognised trade union of their choice, that being, the Psychiatric Nurses Association, PNA. In 2019 when there were shenanigans with confidential documents, they went on strike. They did so because they wanted to be represented by the PNA as the union of their choice but they were refused. We keep hearing that the HSE does not recognise them. I have been told that the Department of Health has engaged with HSE management to see if a resolution to the dispute can be progressed. No solution has yet been found. In the interests of these workers, who have been on the front line during the pandemic, is it not appropriate that they be recognised?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I am afraid I do not have an update on this. My understanding is that the NASRA, which is associated with the PNA, is not recognised by the HSE because it has existing agreements with another union. I think it is SIPTU but I am not 100% sure. I will certainly ask the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, to provide an update for the Deputy.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: In 2019, when the Tánaiste was the Taoiseach, he made a very welcome apology to the victims of child sex abuse in day schools. It was very much appreciated. We are now in February 2021. The Tánaiste is aware that at the time, the *ex gratia* scheme was not fit for purpose. In the absence of the completion of the ongoing review of that scheme, will the Tánaiste intervene in the Creagh Lane case in Limerick and resolve it? Recently, the Taoiseach met students who attended the school in my constituency and made commitments to them publicly and privately. Their complaint is crystal clear and has been proven in court. Will the Tánaiste intervene and honour the commitments to these survivors? I ask him not to hide

behind the review. As I have said previously, it is not needed in the Creagh Lane case.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I have read about the case but I am not an expert on it. I want to be careful about what I say on such a sensitive issue. I know that after the apology I made as Taoiseach we made offers to ten or 16 people, most of whom accepted them, but there are now difficulties with people who did not apply for the *ex gratia* scheme at the time because they believed they would not be eligible. What we will probably have to do is reopen the scheme or re-establish it. I know that work is ongoing by the Department of Education.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I will be as brief as possible. The Government states it will embed ageing in place options for older people in the planning system as the county and city development plans are drawn up this year. Has any directive been issued to local authorities regarding this? What are the Government's plans to address the matter?

The Tánaiste: I am not aware of a directive on this matter but I will check it out and come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Ged Nash: As the Tánaiste knows, we are reaching the endgame on Ulster Bank and the imminent decision we expect from NatWest. Obviously, Ulster Bank is at a crossroads. Earlier, the Tánaiste mentioned the need to consider a third banking force in the context of Irish banking and the Irish economy. It seems that an obvious partner for Ulster Bank's assets and business would potentially be Permanent TSB. I say this because we can use our significant influence as the major shareholder of Permanent TSB to leverage a positive outcome for Irish workers and Irish business and seek to break the Bank of Ireland and AIB duopoly. We know we have issues with competition in this country. It is not just, of course, because we have a limited number of banks in the market as there are also other issues. Will the Tánaiste comment on how he sees the proposition of a third banking force developing over the next period of time?

The Tánaiste: I understand where the Deputy is going with this but I am constrained by stock market rules in what I can say in this regard. What I will say is, as I said earlier, that the Government supports the concept of establishing a third banking force with sufficient scale to challenge Bank of Ireland and AIB. We have never really had that in Ireland and it would be a good thing to have it. We also need to make sure we get it right. The last thing we want to establish is a third banking force that is weak at birth. It needs to be strong and this needs to be borne in mind in any decision that we make.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Will the national task force for vaccinations review the Limerick situation? We will have a very good facility in the Radisson but it is based in County Clare. The task force needs to look at the provision of another vaccination centre within the area of Limerick City and County Council. I note there is provision for a review and for additional capacity to be provided. I ask that the Tánaiste requests the national task force for vaccinations to look into the matter.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I also want to highlight that the mass vaccination centre announced for Limerick is in County Clare. The racecourse in Limerick, which is off the motorway, was offered. The HSE called out and saw it but never got back to it. The greyhound track was offered but again it was not chosen. People from Kilbehenny, Galbally and Abbeyfeale will have to travel for an hour and then go outside the county bounds to a vaccination centre. Why is this when venues in County Limerick were offered? People came back to me and said it is because there is racing going on. There are no spectators at racing. The racecourse said it

could facilitate it. It has two exits and two entrances. It was not accepted but the vaccination centre was put in County Clare and we will have people travelling one hour and leaving the county to go to a vaccination centre. This does not make sense.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputies. The list of mass vaccination centres is not exhaustive. There may be additional centres or centres that are open for a few weeks in one area and then moved to another area so that a large county can be catered for and perhaps this can include Limerick. I want to make the point very clearly that the list is not exhaustive and there may be additional centres. It is also important that people appreciate that many people, if not the majority of people, will not get the vaccine in a mass vaccination centre but in their local GP practice or primary care centre. They may even get it in their local community hospital or local pharmacy. It is not the case that everyone or even most people will have to travel far at all because the vaccines will be provided through GP surgeries, primary care centres and community pharmacies. In some cases, the National Ambulance Service may even go out to remote locations and provide vaccines in remote areas such as islands.

Deputy Richard Bruton: This system is very inadequate. On Wednesday morning, from 9.30 a.m. people were queueing around the chair of the Ceann Comhairle waiting for the opportunity to join the list. A number of hours later, they got the opportunity to speak. We need to devise a process whereby people can signal in advance their desire to raise a question and there is some selection procedure, perhaps by lottery, for them. Even from the point of view of social distancing it is not appropriate. While we are all getting used to queueing, it is not a good use of Members' time to have to physically come in here to get in a queue of this nature.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I wish to speak on a similar matter.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy O'Donnell has already spoken but he can continue.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I agree with my colleague. I have raised this matter with the Ceann Comhairle. We need a process for the Order of Business whereby people have certainty in being able to function and being able to raise issues of the day. It is an issue I have raised previously and I support my colleague, Deputy Bruton.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I share some of the dissatisfaction expressed by the Deputies. I note that at least one of them had a second opportunity to come in. It is very rare for some of us even to get one opportunity. That aside, there is scope for us to look at the system. It is deeply frustrating. We know the reasons there have to be constraints but I caution that any system needs to be reflective of the relative size of the Government to the Opposition parties and it has to be fair. The Business Committee should be alerted to this and should be able to come up with some system. I do not think there is any dispute between us that there is no great satisfaction with the system but we can improve it and ensure all Deputies get a fair go.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I agree with all of the speakers. If half an hour was designated for Questions on Promised Legislation only, with the Government business agreed and done outside of that half an hour, people in the rota would be able to get in. As I said earlier, I was second on the list but I was overlooked. I take it that I was overlooked and that is fine and I got an opportunity to come in. I was there at 9.30 a.m. yesterday and ten Deputies in the Chamber today said I was there but I was off the list for some reason. I accept mistakes can be made but we need a system whereby half an hour is given just for promised legislation so that people on the list are gone through efficiently.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is absolutely wonderful to see the interest there is in participating in Questions on Promised Legislation but it is not just questions on promised legislation. It is questions very often on whatever you are having yourself. I am very conscious of the fact that none of my predecessors would have had lists or would ever have answered questions in the House about what criteria they applied for the selection of people. I have tried, as has the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, in the past and present Dáil to list people on the basis on which they have indicated. The Dáil reform committee, appreciating the point that each Deputy has made, has looked on several occasions, most recently this week, at how we might deal more efficiently with this, along the lines that Deputy Bruton set out. We have yet to reach agreement. In fact, at the next meeting of the reform committee a proposal from the Sinn Féin Party and the Government will be looked at. It is hoped that out of that will come a more satisfactory system.

Veterinary Practice (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to prohibit the ownership of veterinary practices by persons other than those persons who are veterinary practitioners and to provide for related matters.

I appreciate the opportunity to move the Veterinary Practice (Amendment) Bill. It proposes to amend the Veterinary Practice Act 2005. For a number of years the interpretation of the Act was that corporate bodies could not own veterinary practices. A number of years ago that interpretation was changed and they are now in a position to buy veterinary practices in this country.

Unfortunately, in other countries, including in the UK and Northern Ireland, where corporate bodies are able to purchase veterinary practices the level of services decreases and the cost of services increases simultaneously. In Northern Ireland, where a veterinary practice was bought by a corporate, smaller farmers in Donegal were left without any 24-hour service. We have to make sure that does not happen in this country.

We have a veterinary service in this country of which we can be very proud. It provides a 24-hour service. This is not just for farmers; it also includes small animal practices. They are often the target of corporate entities as they are the most lucrative of practices financially.

The aim of the Bill is to ensure that veterinary practitioners are the only ones who can own veterinary practices. Veterinary Ireland is completely in support of this. It feels it is the way to ensure a proper 24-hour service is provided at an economic cost to consumers, whether they are farmers or pet owners in towns or cities.

In the previous Dáil term we had a lot of discussions with the Veterinary Council and Veterinary Ireland. The council made a number of presentations to the Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine in the previous Dáil term and put forward its case for leaving the law as it stands. The view of the Fianna Fáil Party is that the amendment is necessary to ensure that there is a proper service for those who need it, whether that is someone with a pet dog or a large animal practice.

Another problem in rural and remote areas is the availability of vets. I would welcome suggestions on the Bill so that we can ensure the availability of vets all over the country. In areas

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where bovine animals do not exist in large numbers, the economic viability of a veterinary practice is brought into serious question. It is something we need to re-examine. There is an animal welfare issue in that the availability on a 24-hour basis is essential for animal welfare.

My purpose in bringing forward the Bill is to ensure that there is a quality of service at a reasonable cost. It has been clearly shown to us that when corporate bodies take over veterinary practices in other countries, the level of service decreases significantly and the cost increases. In moving the Bill I wish to ensure that we continue to experience the excellent level of veterinary care we have had over generations. We are very proud of that and veterinarians are very proud of the service they are able to provide to their customers. I want to make sure that continues. On that basis, I am very happy to present the Bill to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: I congratulate Deputy Cahill. Is the Bill opposed?

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Consumer Protection (Loyalty Penalty and Customer Complaints) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Ged Nash: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to prohibit differential pricing in respect of certain subscription service supplied to consumers; to require certain traders to establish schemes for handling consumer complaints in relation to their services and to prescribe minimum standards in relation to such schemes; for those purposes to amend the Consumer Protection Act 2007; and to provide for connected matters.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to introduce the Bill, which is co-signed by my colleagues Deputies Duncan Smith and Aodhán Ó Ríordáin. It is a timely Bill and deals predominantly with the question of dual pricing, not just in the Irish insurance market but in other economic sectors.

As was exposed by repeated Central Bank reports and other surveys, the practice whereby suppliers charge higher prices to existing customers, who they believe are unlikely to switch to another provider in order to get a better deal, is now what we might describe as endemic in this country. The result is that, in many cases, people who stay with a supplier or service provider end up paying significantly more, even when all other aspects under consideration are equal.

This loyalty penalty affects those who are disadvantaged and older customers who may not have the time, resources or knowledge to navigate complex financial products, and neither should they be expected to switch products constantly in order to get better value for money or

a decent service. This should be a given in any modern democracy and regulated economy. Not only are non-switchers being ripped off, they are also indirectly subsidising lower premiums for those regular switchers who are often more financially savvy and better off to begin with.

Evidence from the UK regulator is that, “[T]he loyalty penalty is significant and impacts on many people including those who can least afford it”. The UK regulator duly responded by introducing reforms to ban the practice of dual pricing for once and for all, but yet again in Ireland we are lagging behind. The first and immediate provision of the Bill is to outlaw loyalty penalties for services provided to consumers on subscription. Importantly, this would not only apply to insurance policies but also to other sectors such as utilities, broadband, phone contracts and so on.

This area has been the subject of much debate. The Bill will significantly strengthen existing consumer protection legislation and, arguably, enhance it in order to take account of some of the very serious issues that many citizens would have encountered in recent years with particular companies like eir, for example.

As it stands, there is no obligation on service providers to establish a system for handling customer complaints or to abide by their own procedures and commitments if they have such a system in place. That is not sustainable or something anybody in the House would support. Consequently companies like eir, known for shoddy customer service, act with absolute impunity and treat their customers with contempt. There is little or no recourse when a customer has a problem with the customer complaints procedures operated by a subscription service provider. Such companies need to be held accountable for their actions and this Bill will achieve just that.

We should all agree that where systems like these are failing, the State has an obligation and duty to step in to address the serious power imbalances that exist between businesses and their customers and to legislate to protect the interests of citizens. The Bill, in summation, will tip the balance in favour of the ordinary consumer and serve as an important first step in tackling dodgy processes, cowboy companies and rip-off merchants alike.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members’ Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members’ time.

Deputy Ged Nash: I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Congratulations, Deputy, on the Bill.

Covid-19 (Enterprise, Trade and Employment): Statements

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am glad to have this opportunity to update the House on the topic of business and Covid-19

under this new format of statements and questions and answers. I look forward to answering Deputies' questions. I am sharing time with the Minister of State, Deputy Troy.

Although today's topic is business and Covid-19, I will also speak about how my Department is supporting employees. Covid-19 financial assistance, low cost loans and workplace health and safety guidance are in place for workers as much as for businesses. Every business saved is at least one job saved, a livelihood secured and a family sustained. The financial support the Government is providing to businesses and workers is unprecedented. Almost 1 million people of working age are now in receipt of weekly payments, including the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, employment wage subsidy and jobseeker's benefit or jobseeker's allowance. Support for business includes the weekly Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, payment for businesses forced to close their doors to the public, reduced VAT rates, a commercial rates holiday, the sustaining enterprise fund, the tourism business continuity scheme and low cost loans.

Last week, I announced €160 million in additional funding for businesses during the pandemic. This includes a new €60 million scheme, the Covid-19 business aid scheme, CBAS, which is being developed to provide grants to businesses that are ineligible for the Government's other existing schemes that are designed to help defray the cost of fixed costs. Wholesalers, suppliers, caterers, office-based enterprises and events companies that are down more than 75% in turnover on last year and in receipt of a rates bill may benefit. While the grant is modest at €8,000, it will help smaller businesses in particular to cover the costs of rent, insurance, utilities and security. An additional €10 million will be allocated to the Covid-19 products scheme to help in the fight against the virus. Firms researching or manufacturing personal protective equipment, PPE, sanitisers, tests, equipment or other medicinal products which are relevant to the battle against Covid-19 are eligible for funding of up to 50% of their capital investment costs. The Government also approved an additional €90 million for the sustaining enterprise fund which offers funding of up to €800,000, with €200,000 or 50% in non-repayable grants to eligible manufacturing and internationally traded services companies. Deputies may not be as familiar with this fund as they are with other schemes, but it has proven to be very popular and has helped to protect 22,000 jobs throughout the State.

The three main schemes, the CRSS, employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS and PUP, compare favourably with any other packages on offer in other countries. It is important to explain that the EWSS is designed to help with payroll costs and to keep people in employment, the PUP is to replace lost income for those laid off, and the CRSS and CBAS are to assist with fixed costs that businesses have to pay even when closed. The Government is very much open to proposals from specific sectors as to how it can help further. However, I must be clear that our schemes are there to help meet fixed costs that cannot be avoided and to provide basic weekly income support up to maximum of €350 per week. We cannot provide compensation for loss of personal income above this level or compensation for loss of profits for any sector. To do so for any single sector would be unfair and it would be unaffordable to do so for all.

To complement the unprecedented levels of financial assistance to businesses, we are also going to fast-track the introduction of a new, low cost, so-called summary rescue process, separate from the examinership process, which some people have referred to as examinership lite. A public consultation is under way, and legislation is planned for the summer. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, has responsibility for company law and he will take the lead on this.

Turning to workers' rights, the Government moved swiftly last year to introduce the Covid-19 enhanced illness benefit. This payment provides €350 per week to anyone who is self-isolating with Covid-19, awaiting a test or restricting his or her movements on the instruction of a doctor or the HSE. In most cases, it is paid for two weeks, but can be paid for much longer if somebody is out sick with Covid-19 for a prolonged period. The existence of this payment is sometimes lost in the debate about sick pay. However, I acknowledge that the pandemic has highlighted the need to put a longer term, sustainable scheme in place to cover all illnesses and bring Ireland into line with most other EU countries. I have committed to introducing a statutory sick pay scheme for Ireland as part of my work programme for this year. Having consulted the public, unions and employers, we plan to have a general scheme by the end of next month, with legislation enacted by the summer.

Separately, in line with the programme for Government, I have formally asked the Low Pay Commission to examine and make recommendations on the best approach and design for a living wage for Ireland. This is now included in the Low Pay Commission's work plan for 2021. I welcome the fact the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has retaken its seats on the Low Pay Commission. I am very conscious that the living wage, sick pay and auto enrolment will present additional costs for businesses, particularly small businesses, over the coming years. We must consider carefully how to manage these major reforms, how they are sequenced and timed and how the additional costs are met. Our objective is to improve terms and conditions for many and to raise the threshold of decency for those in poorly paid and insecure employment, but this will not be achieved if, as an unintended consequence, businesses become less viable, hours are cut and jobs are lost. We must guard against that and get the balance right.

Part of my Department's remit is protecting the health and safety of workers and members of the public in workplaces. The Government published the Work Safely Protocol on 20 November 2020, to replace the Return to Work Safely Protocol. It incorporates the current advice on the public health measures needed to reduce the spread of Covid-19 in the workplace as issued by NPHET and the Department of Health. The Health and Safety Authority continues to be the lead agency for monitoring compliance with the protocol. Its inspectorate is supplemented significantly by deploying other inspectors from across Government, including from the Workplace Relations Commission, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, environmental health officers from the HSE, the Department of Education as well as the Sea-Fisheries Protection Agency and Tusla. This has resulted in an additional 700 inspectors checking compliance with the protocol as part of their normal inspection regime. To date in excess of 25,500 Covid-19 inspections of workplaces, checking compliance with the protocol, have taken place. Compliance in workplaces is reported to be high, but we must remain vigilant. Officials are now re-examining the Work Safely Protocol in line with the new version of the living with Covid-19 plan and any reopening of the economy that may occur later in the spring or summer.

Turning to the wider economic picture, I believe the pandemic has accelerated some of the deep structural shifts that were already in motion across the economy. The sudden shift online poses serious problems for the traditional retail industry, for example. We have begun to see the consequences of that unfold in the cases of Debenhams and Arcadia. More and more purchases are happening online, and while there will be more jobs in tech, warehousing and delivery, there will be fewer jobs as sales assistants. Retraining and other opportunities will be key.

Despite all the challenges we face, I am optimistic for the year ahead, especially the second half. When I last spoke here in October on the topic of business and Brexit, we discussed the very serious implications of a possible no-deal Brexit. The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation

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Agreement has led to some difficulties for businesses, and we are working our way through them, but the economic outlook is much improved because we have a deal. October's budget was premised on the basis of a no-deal Brexit and the absence of the broadly available vaccine. Neither scenario has materialised in 2021, which provides us with grounds for hope. On the down side, however, October's budget did not project a prolonged level 5 lockdown in January, February and March.

Unlike previous occasions in our history Ireland entered this economic crisis in a very strong position, with low unemployment, a budget surplus, falling public and private sector debt, and exports in 2020 broke all records. We are again expecting economic growth in 2021, at least as measured by GDP and GNI*. This is driven by Ireland's booming export sector and the release of pent up consumer demand later in the year. However, as is often the case headline figures such as GNP, GDP and GNI* do not paint the full picture and do not describe the human experience of people currently living in this society and economy. The Irish economy is hurting and people are hurting, and sadly will hurt for months to come. Therefore, in the short term, the Government will extend into quarter 2 the vital financial supports in place for business, including the Covid-19 restrictions support scheme, CRSS, employment wage subsidy scheme, and the pandemic unemployment payment. It will also provide more targeted financial support, beyond quarter 2 for those sectors that have been particularly wounded by this pandemic, such as aviation, tourism, hospitality, the arts and entertainment.

We will bounce back, possibly sooner and quicker than some people think, but I am not naive to think that things will go back to normal, nor should they. Some things will change forever and the pandemic will leave scars, economic and social, lost family and friends, lost jobs, and lost livelihoods. Our challenge is to rebuild the economy, and not just return to the old normal, but to build a better new normal when the pandemic is over.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy): As Minister of State with responsibility for trade promotion, digital and company regulation, I am acutely aware of the need for the regulatory regime and Ireland to be supportive and adaptable to the change and challenges that our businesses face, and to ensure that the right balance is struck when making laws in the area of company, competition and consumer law. Since taking office, I focused my attention on measures to put in place over the lifetime of this Government.

Excellent progress has been made across three areas of company, competition and consumer law which are under my remit. I delivered on the Companies (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Covid-19) Act 2020 which has resulted in companies and co-ops having the ability to hold AGMs remotely, an increased period of protection in examinership, and an increase of the threshold at which a company can be wound up. These important amendments ensure the normal operation of the Companies Act during the pandemic and provide breathing space to companies struggling with pressures under liquidity. The amendments can remain in place by Covid-19 continues to disrupt business operations.

The Company Registration Office has also shown considerable flexibility on the deadlines for filing annual returns in recognition of the additional challenges faced in companies. It has also introduced a new filing system which will permanently simplify the filing process.

I have been particularly mindful of the challenges that will face small companies, the backbone of our economy, as and when the country emerges from the shadow of Covid-19. I want

to make sure that those companies which are fundamentally viable businesses have access to an affordable small company rescue process, which the Tánaiste mentioned. At our request, the company law review group, CLRG, considered the issue and made recommendations in this regard. My Department is developing legislation at pace and a public consultation exercise is under way. I encourage key stakeholders to make submissions. I want to have the legislation in place before the summer break. I would greatly appreciate the support of the Opposition in ensuring we can achieve that.

I also want to ensure that employees of companies which are entering insolvency have knowledge of, and access to, their rights under company law. I expect the CLRG to report to me over the next fortnight on the issue of employee rights when a company goes into liquidation and have made arrangements to discuss these company law matters with the chair of the CLRG in early March. Again, any legislative proposals will be my priority.

Also in the area of company law, we are progressing the legislation to establish the ODCE as stand alone agency to be called the corporate enforcement authority. I eagerly await the pre-legislative scrutiny report of the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment as I want to go to Cabinet as soon as possible in order to have the Bill published and introduced. This is an important step in ensuring that Ireland has a strong company law enforcement regime.

I also want to strengthen competition law. The forthcoming Competition (Amendment) Bill, which is undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny, will give national competition authorities such as the CCPC new powers with regard to enforcing competition law. The legislation will break new ground in this area, giving the authorities teeth by providing for administrative sanctions and other tools. Again, I look forward to the joint committee's report which I will consider carefully before having the Bill brought to the Government for publication.

Speaking of competition, I want to ensure that businesses and consumers have access to affordable and competitively priced insurance. I have instructed my officials to develop new legislation concerning the Personal Injuries Assessment Board which will widen its scope and develop its functions as regards assessments. This is but one part of a comprehensive cross-government insurance action plan, which is being led by the Tánaiste.

On broader matters of insurance and its impact on business continuity there can be no ambiguity from insurance companies in paying legitimate claims on business interruption policies. The courts have given their verdicts, the Central Bank has issued its instructions and insurance companies must now honour valid claims from businesses without delay. I hope the legitimate claims will be resolved swiftly and allow those businesses with valid claims to access fair compensation.

It must also be noted with regards to insurance the subject of forbearance. Anecdotal reports indicate that many businesses have not been afforded such reprieves. I call on the insurance companies to honour their commitments in relation to affording businesses which are closed or whose activity is reduced due to the pandemic to be awarded an element of forbearance. I acknowledge and appreciate the contribution of the insurance industry to the overall economy and the many tens of thousands it employs - no one wants to cripple this industry - but what we do expect is fair play and due process for their customers.

My Government colleagues and I are committed to seeing effective insurance reform and the actions set out in the action plan for insurance are essential to reducing the cost of insurance

and dealing with the negative impact this has on businesses and consumers. I look forward to the publication by the Judicial Council on the new award guidelines. I hope it is ambitious in its proposals. Reform of the Personal Injuries Board and enhancing the powers of the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission is a top priority for me to bring about effective change for consumers, businesses and community and voluntary groups.

The Government has rapidly put in place comprehensive packages to help businesses and workers during the pandemic, including the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, the Covid-19 restrictions support scheme, CRSS, low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. Last week, the Government announced the new €60 million scheme, called the Covid-19 business aid scheme, CBAS, that is being developed to provide grants to businesses ineligible for the Government's other existing schemes. The introduction of the scheme will act as a further aid for businesses as part of the suite of enterprise measures that are already in operation, and crucially help the majority of these enterprises which have been locked out of CRSS. It is estimated that up to 7,500 eligible businesses may benefit from this scheme.

This scheme will help address some of the needs of businesses as we navigate the ongoing public health crisis, keeping viable businesses in operation and supporting jobs. However, it is important to recognise that the scheme is not a silver bullet and while many more businesses will be able to avail of the many Government supports, there are others which cannot, such as the event sector. I will continue to work with this sector and with my colleagues in government, particularly the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, to ensure that this sector is further supported.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am sharing some time with my colleague, Teachta Doherty. I ask the Minister that we would go back and forth with the questions and answers and try to respect the time, if possible. Time is short and I do not want to go into my colleague's time. Also, if there is a question that requires a follow-up I ask that we may engage afterwards on it.

I will start by raising the issue of Ulster Bank. I am aware that my colleague, Teachta Doherty, raised it already in the context of the broader implications but I want to focus on the men and women employed in Ulster Bank, many of whom found out through the media about the potential decision being made by NatWest so, naturally, they are extremely concerned. There is enough going on in the world without that. Has the Minister been in touch with Ulster Bank to discuss the potential losses of 2,500 jobs in this State and the 600 that potentially could be lost in the North? I ask him to use some of the time today to publicly express support for the use of the transfer of undertakings legislation to ensure that as many of those jobs in the bank, specifically those in the sales and services sector, are protected.

The Minister's Department will be working to assess the broader implications. There are implications for workers. There will be implications for business also. We are talking about the potential loss of jobs but there will be implications in the event that the decision goes the way we believe it will go. There will be implications for businesses and for those workers. I ask the Minister to arrange a briefing for the Opposition spokespersons on this and also to bring us up to speed on the actions his Department will be taking to support the jobs and those businesses impacted by this decision. I ask also that the Minister would engage, as a matter of priority, with the Financial Services Union, FSU. I am aware it is seeking an emergency meeting with him to discuss how some or all of those jobs can be saved.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I thank the Deputy. The Minister for Finance is leading on this issue on behalf of the Government. He has been in touch, as recently as yesterday, with Ulster Bank and its parent, NatWest. He has also met with the FSU. He is keeping me, the Taoiseach and the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, informed of the situation but he is the lead person for the Government on all aspects relating to the Ulster Bank situation.

I understand that any restructuring that may occur will probably be for the Republic of Ireland, not for Northern Ireland, but that may change. In response to Deputy Doherty's request earlier, I know the Minister for Finance will be happy to brief Opposition spokespeople on this as the situation evolves but, unfortunately, just like Deputy O'Reilly, we are hearing a lot of it from the media also. I know that must be a very unpleasant experience for staff and for customers also. We have not been informed, and my Department has to be formally informed of any collective redundancies. We have received no notification of that as things stand. Obviously, the objectives of Government, to the extent that it is involved in this, and these are commercial decisions for NatWest, are to protect the customers, save as many jobs as is possible and minimise the number of compulsory redundancies and obviously the use of TUPE is an option in that regard.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I want to raise the issue of bogus self-employment, which he will be aware of. The pandemic has exposed the nasty and disgusting nature of bogus self-employment within this State. We know that those workers misclassified as self-employed receive reduced entitlement to social welfare but also they do not have access to the same level of sick pay. We could debate all day the adequacy of the sick pay arrangements but these people have none. The recent judgment regarding the Domino's workers shows that cognisance has to be taken of the actual relationship and not just the contractual relationship. Many of these people are given a bicycle and a navigation system, patted on the back and told they are an entrepreneur now but the pandemic has exposed the real need for action to be taken on this area. We know that this is a playground for unscrupulous employers. I use the word "unscrupulous" but I have others that I would use for those employers. Effectively, they have workers but they do not have any responsibility. That puts decent employers in a very invidious position. It allows unscrupulous employers to get away with extremely poor treatment of their workers and in the middle of a pandemic when we cannot have a significant cohort of workers in a situation where they do not have access to a sick pay scheme. Will the Minister outline what his Department is and will be doing to tackle the issue of bogus self-employment, especially in the gig economy where we all saw recently the implications for the workers in that area?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I thank the Deputy. I have no doubt whatsoever that bogus self-employment is very real and is a problem in our economy and our society but it is worth pointing out that the percentage of people who are self-employed in Ireland has not changed much in recent years. There is a narrative out there that there has been a huge drift to self-employment and that more people who in the past would have been directly employed are now self-employed. That is not the case. In fact, the percentage of people self-employed out of the total workforce has not changed significantly in a very long time, and it is worth checking out those details. The numbers may change because more people are employed but the percentage of the workforce that is self-employed is much the same as it has been for a very long time. Self-employment can be advantageous. People often like the tax arrangements that occur in self-employment such as the way one can write off expenses, costs and so on. They like the flexibility around it but that is not to say that there are not abuses. The scope section in the Department of Social Protection has a particular role in that in determining whether somebody is self-employed. The Revenue

Commissioners can do that also.

I am taking up the issue of delivery riders with the company. I am trying to make contact with it at the moment. The right thing to do in that particular scenario, and it is a particular scenario, is that they should be directly employed with the minimum number of hours. There is no reason flexibility cannot be achieved in other ways but one could employ people directly with the minimum number of hours and then pay extra or bonuses, as appropriate, for particular work done.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I would dispute the use of the word "flexible" and I do not believe that is what people want. I used to represent home helps and employers were always telling me that they did not like to be tied down with anything awkward like a contract. Believe me, workers like being tied down with a contract. They like having that contract codified, particularly in these times, in terms of their entitlement to sick pay and all of those other things that those of us who are properly employed regard as the absolute basic minimum.

I ask the Minister about the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, and the Covid-19 business aid scheme, CBAS. At the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment in October I outlined the issues with regard to the exclusion of many businesses from the scheme. I asked that these schemes be expanded to cater for those excluded businesses. In November, Teachta Doherty highlighted the limitations of the CRSS directly to the Minister for Finance. Following on from the debate at the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment I wrote to the Minister restating my concerns about the scheme. I further outlined the businesses and the sectors that have been excluded. The announcement of the new CBAS was welcome, and we welcomed it at the time. It offered hope to some businesses but there are still businesses that are excluded. I recently heard Paddy Cullivan speak on Today FM about his own business. He is excluded because he does not have a rateable premises. In the interests of protecting as many businesses as possible I ask the Minister to examine those businesses whose turnover has fallen by 75%, that are excluded from both the CRSS and the CBAS but which nonetheless want to ensure they can keep their businesses viable. I note the Minister calls it the CBAS but the CBAS is only a cod if it does not deliver for those businesses that really need it.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I have to give the Deputy that one.

2 o'clock

The CRSS is working very well and I get very good feedback from businesses about it. It is helping them with their fixed costs. It is not the only scheme out there and there is a tourism continuity scheme for businesses that were not included. There is also a transport scheme and the new CBAS, which was only announced the other day. We should bear in mind the employment wage subsidy scheme, which helps with payroll, and the other schemes, including the CRSS, the CBAS and the tourism continuity scheme that are to help with fixed costs.

We are open to new schemes to help sectors that have been left out. I stated when launching the CBAS that it would not be the final scheme. I want to see more real-life examples of companies that are down 75% in turnover and have fixed costs that they cannot avoid. I am not getting many of these but I want them. When we look into the detail of many cases, the issue is lost income or profits and not fixed costs. We would like to see more real-world examples of companies down 75% or more in turnover and have substantial fixed costs that they would like help with. This is instead of compensation for lost income or profits, which is very different.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I raise the question of Aer Lingus, which is relevant to my constituency and that of the Tánaiste. I received an email from an Aer Lingus worker. She had some savings that she hoped to use to buy a home but she is now regarded by the bank as an “uncertain” customer. Will the Tánaiste engage with the Minister for Transport to ensure all the recommendations of the aviation task force are put in place? Will the task force recommendations be refreshed in light of the fact that the aviation industry is looking at a second year of closures? It is vital to our connectivity and it is a significant employer for those of us who live and work around the airport. More needs to be done to ensure we can save the aviation sector. In the interests of saving time, I am happy to receive a reply in writing on the matter.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: The aviation task force report is probably pretty out of date at this stage. It involves reopening our skies and allowing people to fly again but the country has moved on from that process, which was to rely on testing. We are not relying solely on such testing any more.

I say very clearly that Aer Lingus will not be allowed to fail. It is already receiving substantial financial support from the Government both through the employment wage subsidy scheme and funding through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund. Confidential discussions are under way involving the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, on further support for the company so it can be there when we need it again.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I have three questions but as I am very short on time I will ask them as quickly as possible. The first concerns the future growth loan scheme. It is working well because there is longer tenure than the credit guarantee scheme, which is not going as well. Since expanding in July, there have been 4,000 applications but only 2,000 loans approved. I am told AIB and Bank of Ireland is fully subscribed and the Department has said Ulster Bank is still accepting loan applications. We have been told by businesses that it is fully subscribed as well, however, so businesses cannot access credit for six months. Will the Tánaiste give an update on what is left in the envelope of the future growth loan scheme and will he consider expanding the scheme, as it should be expanded?

The second matter is Ulster Bank, which was raised earlier. One cannot overestimate the impact this will have, particularly on small businesses that rely on credit. If their loans are sold or transferred there is no guarantee the new entity will have the same risk profile to allow for overdrafts or credit. Does the Government have a contingency plan? It is fine being briefed on this but is there a plan to use the likes of Permanent TSB, which does not have a business book, to step into that gap?

The final question concerns business interruption. I received correspondence from the Central Bank yesterday and I am glad it has looked at 250 different types of policies from over 30 insurers. It is pushing back against insurers that are refusing to pay out on policies. We know a limited number have started to pay out already. The regulator in Britain has a system where a small or medium enterprise can test a policy on the Financial Conduct Authority website to see if it provides adequate cover. Here, businesses have no idea what is happening or the view of the regulator on the business interruption insurance they hold.

We need to find a way to bring certainty to business because we are nearly a year on from these claims being made. What is the Tánaiste's view on how we can bring that transparency and certainty to bear? Should the Central Bank be communicating with businesses that it thinks may have policies covered by business interruption insurance?

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Deputy Leo Varadkar: As the Deputy states, the future growth loan scheme is working very well. It is long-term money but it is for a particular purpose where companies want to and can expand, so they would already be doing quite well. The microfinance loan for very small businesses is also going very well. The credit guarantee scheme was not doing so well but there has been a big pick-up in the past month or two. I will come back to the Deputy in writing with some of the data on availability but last week we allocated more capital to the future growth loan scheme. That may free more lending. I will write to the Deputy with the correct detail.

I should leave it to the Minister for Finance to update the Opposition on Ulster Bank and I will ensure the briefing occurs as soon as possible. As I indicated to the Deputy last week, the Central Bank has been active on the question of business interruption insurance for a long time and it assessed 250 policies, approximately half of which do not cover Covid-19. Half of the remaining policies cover it if the interruption is caused by the virus on the premises and the remaining policies cover it if the virus is in the vicinity. From speaking with people in business, I know they want the valid policies to be honoured now and for money to be paid. They are not looking forward to years of litigation or a prolonged examination by the Central Bank. They want the policies honoured and paid, and that is what I want too. I will meet representatives of the Central Bank in the next couple of weeks to see what more they can do to make that happen. I will take up the Deputy's suggestion with them as it is a good one.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: There are several matters I wish to raise. I hope the Tánaiste will have time to respond to my contribution either orally or in writing. The first matter is the closure of Ulster Bank and the protection of redundancy rights for workers with respect to the pandemic unemployment payment, the EU directive on the minimum wage and, finally, casual trading by-laws. The Tánaiste knows this move will substantially reduce competition in the Irish mortgage and small and medium enterprise lending markets, which come under his remit and not just that of the Minister for Finance. Currently the average interest rate for new mortgages in Ireland is more than double the EU average and the average interest rate on SME lending and consumer loans in Ireland is also considerably higher than the EU average. Customers with mortgages and business loans will be very concerned that their loans may be flogged to vulture funds. As has also been mentioned, there are 2,800 workers who will also be concerned about their future.

Will the Tánaiste set out what he feels he can do to save these 2,800 jobs as this comes under his remit? Will the State use its majority shareholding in PTSB to create a real third force in Irish banking that would benefit customers and small and medium enterprises? Will the Tánaiste confirm the transfer of undertakings for protection of employment will apply in any possible sale or acquisition of any part of Ulster Bank to an Irish bank where the Minister for Finance is a significant shareholder?

There have been serious concerns raised by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, that time on the PUP does not count towards redundancy rights. The Department has stated that the matter is legally complex and it is seeking advice on it. This seemed to be clear enough when the legislation was introduced last March. The response of the Minister for Finance at the time was:

On the questions put to me by Deputies Nash and Brady, the existing provisions in Schedule 3 to the Redundancies Payment Act 1967 already provide that periods of temporary lay-offs do not break continuity of employment. This will obviously include temporary lay-off periods due to the effects of the measures required by an employer to comply with,

or as a consequence of, Government policy to prevent, limit, minimise or slow the spread of infection of Covid 19. I hope that answers the questions

That was from the Tánaiste's colleague, the Minister for Finance. Based on those assurances in the Dáil by the Minister for Finance and multiple assurances from officials, a Labour Party amendment at the time was not pressed. Unfortunately, the rights of workers are being put at risk by the failure of the Government to carry through on promises that were issued. The Government got co-operation on the emergency legislation because of that promise.

Will the Tánaiste ensure his Department is operating under the interpretation of the law as explained by the Minister for Finance last March? If there is a difficulty, I ask the Minister to advise the House that he intends to fix it, and to do so in a way so as not to disenfranchise the redundancy rights of workers during this pandemic.

On the issue of the minimum wage directive, does the Minister regret his decision to co-sign a letter attempting to undermine the proposed European minimum wage directive? Does he accept that he was part of an effort to block the effective implementation of the directive? Does he accept that Ireland had pre-Covid rates of 23% of the population on low pay, as defined by the OECD, and that 40% of young workers were in insecure work? Does he accept that with less than 30% of the working population covered by collective bargaining, we are far below the 70% coverage deemed normal and desirable in the European context? I ask the Minister whether he or his Department has taken any further action in respect of the proposed minimum wage directive, what future plans exist regarding Ireland's response to this directive, and what plans he has to reduce the dependence of our economy on low pay.

I appreciate that I am eating up most of the time allotted, so a written response would be appreciated to this, my last question. Is the Minister aware of the difficulties faced by small businesses, particularly restaurants and cafes, looking to expand into food trucks and mobile businesses? Has he had any conversations with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the causal trading by-laws, which in many cases do not allow sufficient flexibility for councils to rapidly create new locations for such services? I have drafted a Bill at the request of a cross-party group of councillors in the Howth, Sutton and Baldoyle area, including Councillors Brian McDonagh and Eoghan O'Brien, which I will be happy to make available to the Minister. With time, other emergency legislation and the co-operation of the Government, it could be delivered quickly.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: They are all very reasonable questions. Unfortunately, I cannot write as quickly as the Deputy can speak, so I may have missed a few of them. I will do my best to answer those I can remember.

It is the case that the average interest rates on mortgages and loans in Ireland are too high, and higher than the EU average. However, they have been falling, and falling substantially in recent years. It should be borne in mind that like-for-like comparisons are often misleading. Other countries have much higher bank charges. For example, we will often find very low interest rates in Denmark, but what we are not told about are the sign-up and bank charges and all the other charges they pay but we do not. Unfortunately, one of the other reasons we have higher interest rates in this State relative to other countries, including the UK and the EU, is historically high levels of non-payment. When people do not pay their debts, whether it is individuals or businesses, it has a social consequence. It makes it harder for others to get credit, and those who do face higher interest rates. Often, Members in this House try to ride both horses in

that regard, saying it is okay for people not to pay their debts and then complaining when other people cannot get credit or are expected to pay high interest rates. I do not believe the Deputy is one of those, but there are others in this House who do that and it is wrong. It is also one of the reasons banks in Ireland must have such high capital reserves. That is a major disincentive. Even if a foreign bank comes into Ireland and wants to offer loans or products at a better rate or under better terms, it cannot, because, just by operating in Ireland, it has to set aside large amounts of capital because of our historic high levels of non-payment.

On the issue of Ulster Bank, the Minister for Finance is leading on that for the Government. He has been in discussions with NatWest about potential solutions. I know the transfer of undertakings (protection of employment), TUPE, regulations can apply, but I do not know if they can apply in all circumstances. I do not want to misspeak and get it wrong. They certainly can apply.

On the minimum wage directive, it was a letter that was co-signed with the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Austria. We do have a concern. Ireland has the second or third highest minimum wage in the EU. I am proud to have been part of a Government that increased it by 25% or 30% over the past four or five years. We would not want a scenario in which the minimum wage was set within EU rules that meant we could not increase it or move to a living wage, for example, if there was an EU rule which stated it had to be 50% or 40% of average income, or something similar. We want to ensure it improves conditions and that we do not end up signing up to an EU directive that is a lowest common denominator one, which is what often happens.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Brendan Smith is sharing time with Deputies Alan Farrell, Bruton and Cathal Crowe.

Deputy Brendan Smith: As the Tánaiste is aware, there are widespread concerns in many communities about the decision taken by NatWest Bank some time ago to consider all strategic options on the future of Ulster Bank. Ulster Bank has 88 branches in our State and has more than 2,800 employees. It has a substantial presence in the Border region, especially in my own constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, with three branches in County Cavan and one in Monaghan. It has been an integral part of Irish commercial life, and it has been trading in our country for almost 200 years. Any thought of the closure of this bank and its branch network would be devastating for many communities and for the employees of the bank. Any further diminution in banking competition in this country would be most concerning and damaging. Ulster Bank is the third largest bank and we lack banking competition in this country as it is.

In my own constituency, there are Ulster Bank branches in Ballyconnell, Cavan town, Ballyjamesduff and Monaghan town. Traditionally, Ulster Bank has been very much associated with Ulster and the Border region. It has had a very successful business, by and large, for the most of 200 years in communities right throughout our island. As the third largest bank in the country, we cannot afford to lose it. From speaking to employees for some time and interacting with private individuals and people with small and medium enterprises, I know Ulster Bank's business is across all sectors of our economy. From the perspective of employees, business, enterprise and many communities, it is essential a further clear message is sent to NatWest that we want to see Ulster Bank retained in its current format, with its 88 branches and more than 2,500 employees.

For some time, I have engaged with the Minister for Finance and the Taoiseach on this mat-

ter. I appeal to the Tánaiste, as the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, to give a clear message to NatWest management that we want to see Ulster Bank remain in our State. We do not want to see it exit our State, with the serious consequences it will entail for some many individuals, families, households and businesses of all sizes. It has been extremely important in our communities. It was subject to major rationalisation over the years. I want to see that network retained and the jobs of its employees protected.

Deputy Alan Farrell: First, I welcome the Tánaiste's comments on Aer Lingus. I think he will accept that most employees on the support schemes and who are sitting at home will take his comments literally when he states that Aer Lingus will not be allowed to fail.

The past 12 months have been a particularly punishing time for business, which I know the Tánaiste and all Members of the House accept. It is acutely important that we also recognise that the pandemic has not just had a catastrophic effect on our businesses and the Exchequer but also on the mental health and well-being of employees, regardless of age, skill or sector. Throughout this pandemic, we have been committed to supporting enterprise through the various schemes. In fact, a cursory glance at the Department's website shows four pages of schemes, grants and loans that are available to businesses or have been over the past 12 months.

Specifically, I want to focus on the hospitality sector. As the Minister is aware, quite a number of businesses, including restaurants, pubs, etc. have not been able to trade for a sustained period of time over the past 12 months. The Minister has mentioned the CRSS, the details of which have recently been announced. However, I must ask whether supports might be available in respect of the restart grant. Also, on the interesting point made by a Deputy about businesses, especially restaurants, that want to set up a temporary vehicle-based business, I ask whether supports will be available for them through the Minister's Department.

The other question I have to ask concerns the working from home options, which I know our colleague, Senator Currie, has made much of over recent months. There are initiatives there, but I would be very interested to hear whether supports will be available to employers to help them support their own employees in making as much as they can of working from home as a policy rather than returning to office-based work once the pandemic lifts from these shores.

Deputy Richard Bruton: As vaccines start to take effect and we begin to see improvement in our figures, we need a credible pathway for reopening our economy. It must be made clear that it will not be a return to what had been there previously. We are now entering a period of dramatic, transformative change. That must be at the heart of it. As I said earlier, that will need the Government to sign up to some imaginative flagship projects, such as offshore energy projects and others which we could go through if we had the time.

We need a credible restart package and it must involve some expectations on very important players who are not directly in the control of Government, including banks, insurance companies, landlords and Revenue in its role of tax warehousing. All four of those players have a huge interest in our getting it right in terms of recovery and they must play a constructive role in that regard. The State should be giving some indication of the sort of role they ought to play. If, as will inevitably be the case, restructuring is necessary in some businesses, people need to have some certainty as to how, for example, the crystallising of redundancy obligations will occur and how that will interact with the insolvency fund at a time when many companies will be very short on cash.

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In terms of transformative change, we need to roll out very rapidly what is described in the programme for Government as the town centre first initiative. We must recognise that the retail high street is dramatically changing. We need an integrated drive to use the many tools that are available to give our town and city centres a chance to revive. We also need to be anticipating that companies will have to put themselves on a pathway to low-carbon competitiveness. That has to be an integral part of any recovery plan that is articulated because the later that change is left, the less effective it will be.

I welcome the Government's commitment to a speedy rescue process. It is important that it be at the directors' initiative that they commence the process, without having to go to the court, that it will apply to companies with fewer than 50 employees and that the rescue plan must be approved by 50% plus of creditors, not the higher thresholds that apply elsewhere. I wonder, however, where the equity will come from. Is the Government looking at how effective the ISIF model of providing equity to companies coming out of difficulty but with a strong viable future has been? Is it considering other vehicles for getting new equity into viable companies?

Finally, I welcome the Tánaiste's response to the changing nature of work and his adoption of what I would describe as a new social contract in regard to the expectations from enterprise and its obligations to workers. We must see that expanded into other areas, particularly skills, where we need to see embedded in Irish enterprise apprenticeships and a commitment to life-long learning. I hope that issue will be expanded in the Tánaiste's thinking.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I have a few points I wish to make and I hope the Tánaiste will have time to respond to them. The points relate generally to the aviation sector, which has probably been the most exposed and ravaged by the onslaught brought on by the Covid crisis. The first issue relates to the maintenance, repair and operations, MRO, sector, which is a significant part of the aviation economy. It is very large in my constituency of Clare, around Shannon Airport, and also quite large in Cork and in the hinterland of Dublin Airport. There are 22,000 aircraft registered globally, many of which land in Ireland, are repaired and then take to the sky again. That cannot happen at the moment because aviation is not operating as it normally does. The sector has been very reliant for the past number of months on the EWSS and it is looking for some indicators today and in the coming weeks that the scheme will be extended until such time as the sector recovers.

Of equal importance is the IDA Ireland training grant. Many operators in the MRO sector are taking on college graduates and undergraduates to work in their hangars and other facilities where they are provided with really high-quality training. They are very reliant on IDA Ireland training grants to facilitate that. They have a cohort of staff over and above what is required at the moment to maintain aircraft but they can only retain them with the continued support of IDA Ireland training grants. That is important.

The final point I wish to raise concerns the *Kurzarbeit*, which is a very innovative and successful scheme operating in Germany. It is basically a short-time work benefits scheme which encourages employers to keep on employees, in some cases reducing their working week to 60% but, crucially, not laying them off. When taxation is adjusted, it ensures that people are not significantly down on their income. When people's pay is not significantly reduced, it means that their money and everything they spend circulates in the economy. By and large, it has been viewed, both within the European context and globally, as a very successful model for keeping income going to employees, not having workers laid off and ensuring people can weather everything Covid has brought. Has the Tánaiste encountered that scheme, has he been briefed

on it and might he consider introducing something similar here?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I thank the Deputies. I recognise Deputy Farrell's ongoing interest in Aer Lingus, Dublin Airport and aviation workers in particular. As I said earlier, we are in discussions with Aer Lingus to see what we can do to make sure the airline survives the pandemic and is there to enable connectivity whenever we can get flying again.

In regard to the hospitality sector, it benefits from both the wage subsidy scheme and the CRSS, which applies when a premises is closed. I know many businesses have moved over to take-out and delivery and have been very innovative in that regard.

When it comes to remote working, including working from home, it is intended that the budget in October will include a tax package to provide a better set of expenses and tax deductibles for people who are engaged in such work. We are also examining means to incentivise businesses to enable people to work from home or work remotely. At the moment, some companies are stuck with both the cost of an office that is empty and the cost of people working at home. We need to help them with the transition.

As Deputy Bruton said, we are entering a period of major change. It is change that was happening anyway but it has been accelerated by the pandemic. It involves remote working and, therefore, investment in broadband. I pay tribute to the Deputy's work as Minister in making sure that contract was signed. The Deputy referred to offshore wind. The transition is going to be green and digital and, in addition, it needs to involve things like lifelong learning and second-chance education.

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

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I will come back to the Deputies' other points later, if I can, or in writing.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I am sharing time with Deputy Conway-Walsh. I had hoped to have a question-and-answer exchange with the Tánaiste but I am sure he will appreciate that I must raise the proposed lay-offs in the Kerry Group. It is a very worrying development for businesses in north Kildare. The Tánaiste will be aware that the company itself employs hundreds of my constituents in Naas. These are highly skilled workers with large financial commitments, many of them crippled with mortgages as is the norm in this State.

The Kerry Group is synonymous with Ireland and its green fields, but not so much with Malaysia or Mexico. During my time on Kildare County Council, we pulled out all the stops for the company, whose representatives got the VIP treatment, the red carpet and everything else when they came to Kildare in 2016. The Kerry Group makes huge profits, including €797 million last year and €1 billion in 2019. Has the Tánaiste had any engagement with the company and what can he do to protect the jobs in Naas, if they are affected?

Second, I would like to raise the events sector, which was referred to earlier by the Minister of State, Deputy Troy. Will the Government look seriously and urgently at making the State an EU hub for the live events industry post Covid? The opportunity is there for the taking if we are ambitious and creative enough. The live industry is huge in north Kildare, much more so than I realised before I engaged with representatives late last year. It supports thousands of jobs directly and thousands more spin-off jobs. With the UK's exit from the EU, we have a critical opportunity to set ourselves up as an English-speaking gateway between the US and EU

for live events. Pre-Brexit, Britain had 85% of the live production capability for touring. Now, acts from the US could come here, hire their crews, support and transport, do their rehearsals and set off for concert tours in the EU. What will the Government do to grow our live events industry and the jobs associated with it, building on our global reputation in arts and entertainment? Will the Tánaiste reach out to British live events companies that might want to transfer their businesses here and thereby create highly skilled jobs and investment in this country? We have huge talent here which traditionally had to go elsewhere. We could keep it here and the Tánaiste would have our full support if he were to look into that.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Notwithstanding what the Tánaiste said about Ulster Bank in the House earlier, if redundancies are to happen, will he be calling for the money from the sale of the bank's existing loan book to be ring-fenced for a decent redundancy package for workers?

Is it acceptable that he respond to each of my questions in turn?

An Ceann Comhairle: It is a little unfair to Deputy Cronin. If Deputy Conway-Walsh put all her questions, we could then take the two sets together, if possible. If not, will the Tánaiste correspond?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Yes.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I foresee that as the various schemes for workers and businesses come to an end, a number of companies will be withdrawing from the State. What legislation does the Government have in place to ensure that workers' rights will be protected in that scenario and that we will not end up in the circumstances in which we ended up recently regarding the Debenhams and Arcadia workers?

When is the rates waiver due to end? What arrangements has the Tánaiste put in place to ensure it can be extended so businesses will not be crippled under the weight of rates and will have some certainty as to what their expenditure will be?

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has said that, without reform, some employees, having been laid off due to the pandemic and through no fault of their own, could lose out on up to a year of redundancy pay. Will the Government reform employment law so the period spent on the PUP will count towards redundancy payments?

Has the Tánaiste considered making the EU Covid recovery fund available through the local development companies so decision-making could occur locally? Has he considered its use to enhance the transitional LEADER programme?

An Ceann Comhairle: Has the Tánaiste any brief comments?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Kerry Group has been in contact with the Department. We are aware that 150 job losses are planned. They will not all take place in Naas but we will obviously be working to ensure redeployment is an option and that the number of compulsory redundancies will be minimised, if there are any at all.

I had not heard the idea of Ireland becoming an EU hub for live events. It sounds like a good idea. It sounds exciting. I would be interested in reading any proposals on it to determine whether my Department could help with it. The Department of the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, is the lead Department in this

area but I have an interest in it also. I would be interested in studying any proposal that might help the sector to bounce back once it is possible to attend live events again.

On Ulster Bank, I do not believe we should jump the gun here. There has been no announcement yet. There has been no announcement of any redundancies at this stage. My Department has not been informed of any. It is a little early to be talking about the conditions of redundancy at this stage.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time. Could the Tánaiste correspond with the Deputies?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: On the rates waiver issue, the Government is considering whether to extend the rates holiday into quarter 2. We will give businesses notice of that long before the Bill might arrive.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Regarding Kerry Group, is there engagement to determine whether some of the jobs can be saved? Is that the kind of engagement that will happen?

On the Covid-19 business aid scheme, CBAS, the Department's website stated, even up to yesterday, that the information will be provided shortly. What does "shortly" mean? There are some people who will be on a knife edge making decisions. Is it likely that the scheme will come with some of the caveats that were attached to the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS? Some businesses could not avail of the latter because they sell a service rather than a physical product and have no face-to-face interaction with customers. Could the Tánaiste indicate when the CBAS will be introduced and what will be required in order to do so? When will people be able to apply?

A second group of questions I want to ask relates to some of the schemes already in place, such as the stay and spend scheme. The latter was not originally intended to operate in level 5. Several schemes are not being availed of to the extent anticipated. Is the Tánaiste going to review them?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: We have only had initial contact with Kerry Group but my understanding is that what is proposed is a consolidation of services across two of its sites. The group has more staff than work that needs to be done so I am not sure that saving the jobs, as such, is a possibility. Perhaps redeployment, early retirement and voluntary redundancy are possible. The objective is always to avoid compulsory redundancies where possible.

We intend to have the CBAS open for applications by the end of this month. There will not be any requirement for a business to be customer facing in the way there is such a requirement for the CRSS, for example, but there will be a requirement to have a premises and, therefore, fixed costs associated with that premises. That will create a difficulty for those whose business might be based in a vehicle rather than in a premises. The CBAS may not be the last scheme the Government announces. We are always looking for new schemes to assist businesses through this difficult period.

I apologise as I have forgotten the Deputy's last question.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It was on the stay and spend scheme.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: It is fair enough to state that the stay and spend scheme has not cost very much. It has not cost as much as we had believed because people have been confined to

their counties or to within a radius of 5 km. The same applies to the 9% VAT rate. The hospitality sector did not benefit from that in the way we had intended. When we get to the point where hospitality businesses can reopen, which I hope will be in the summer months, we will need to determine what more we can do to help to reboot the industry, which has been closed for much longer than any of us anticipated.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The same kind of question relates to the Ireland-based inbound agents business continuity scheme. I am told the information required to gain access to the scheme is very complex. The process is quite burdensome and there are concerns over commercial sensitivity so the take-up is not as high as it could be. The scheme appears to benefit bigger entities that are better resourced. Will the Tánaiste re-examine how the scheme is working and perhaps take soundings from those who tried to apply but did not because it appears there were issues with it?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Could the Deputy give me the name of the scheme again?

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The Ireland-based inbound agents business continuity scheme. That is how I picked it up.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I will have to check up on that and revert to the Deputy. I am not familiar with that one. I dare say it does not fall under the remit of my Department but I might find that it does so I will check.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is the tourism business continuity scheme.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: That is a scheme under the remit of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Does the Tánaiste have a role in contributing to the applications we make for support under the European instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency, SURE, scheme? Are we applying in a timely way? We seem to have been among the last to apply. There is a very large amount of money available, €100 billion, but we do not want the funding to be exhausted before our applications are made.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: The Minister for Finance is heading up that. He has made the application for funding under the SURE scheme. As I understand it, it involves borrowed money. It is an EU fund from which we can borrow money for schemes such as the EWSS, but it is at a blended rate. We can actually borrow more cheaply from the markets than from EU funds. It is more expensive to borrow through the SURE scheme than on the money markets. We are participating because we believe we should do so, but it is actually more expensive.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I welcome the fact that the Tánaiste said we will not be allowing Aer Lingus to fail. That is as it should be. On the discussions with Aer Lingus, do the supports being provided come with caveats regarding the kinds of services we will be able to have? I refer to our not ending up in a hub based on Manchester or to our becoming a regional airport for Manchester in terms of the flights to the US.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: When I say we will not let Aer Lingus fail, I do not want to create the impression that it is in any way about to fail or anything like that, just in case I am misunderstood. What I am saying is that we are providing a lot of financial support already through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund and the EWSS. We will provide more to enable us to retain

essential connectivity with Heathrow, the United States and those key hubs in Europe, as well as for cargo. The sad truth is that the way things are going now it could be a long time before we see aviation recover. Some people are even saying we may have passed peak aviation. I am not saying that, but some people are. Saving all jobs and all routes may not be possible but we want to protect the company and make sure it is there for essential connectivity in the future.

An Ceann Comhairle: Our next group of contributors begins with Deputy Flaherty, who is sharing with Deputies Richmond, Murnane O'Connor and O'Donnell.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: It is critically important that we highlight the challenges being faced by many of our small and medium-sized businesses as a consequence of Brexit. We have a raft of companies which are directly affected by certificate of origin issues and are dependent on products and materials that are being trafficked through the UK. I have one case of a construction firm in Longford of which I have already apprised the Ministers of State, Deputies Troy and Byrne. If this issue is not addressed, it will affect building costs and potentially drive such costs up by double digits. We require intervention at Government level and at EU level on the issue of certificates of origin.

It is also an issue in the food sector. Panelto Foods, which has a major production facility in Longford, is directly affected and rates this highly in the risk analysis for the business at the moment. Ultimately, it will also affect living costs and food costs. A number of Departments and Revenue have put considerable time and effort into planning for life post Brexit but it is clear that the current customs arrangements are not working.

I have been contacted by Autosmart, a family business in Longford which recently celebrated 25 years in business. It supplies outlets nationwide and import significant stock from the UK. The company boss, Clive McCormack, contacted me on Tuesday and advised me that another of its 40 ft. containers has been held up at customs in Dublin. This is its second delivery to be held up in the past few weeks and the first load spent 48 hours on the docks in Dublin before being passed by customs. The container that arrived on Tuesday should have been offloaded in Longford yesterday and a fleet of trucks should then have ferried the stock around the country. It is struggling to fulfil orders through no fault of its own and this is an unnecessary impediment on an already challenged and stressed SME sector. On both occasions, the Autosmart container was randomly selected by customs for checking. We understand the process and accept it has to happen. There is no issue with that. The Longford business uses the long-established Lombard Shipping for its transport needs and, as the load was due to embark on Tuesday, the agents checked the website to clarify if the load was clear to go to Longford. The check by customs only takes a couple of minutes but these inordinate delays are costing Autosmart and many SMEs nationwide as much as two if not more days of valuable time. When we spoke to Lombards Shipping today, it still had no indication when that container will be cleared and the indications are it could be Saturday before it arrives in Longford. That is three full days after its initial due date. We simply cannot expect or assume that businesses will be able to continue operating under these circumstances and dealing with the uncertainty of not knowing whether a container will arrive today or in three days' time.

Many businesses have reached out to Revenue on the issue and I call on the Tánaiste to work steadfastly to resolve this issue. This is not the UK's fault or the fault of Brexit. The fault here lies squarely with enterprise, customs and Revenue. For the sake of these SMEs nationwide, this issue needs to be tackled immediately.

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Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the Tánaiste and the Minister of State's presence and their opening addresses. I was glad to hear the references, particularly from the Minister of State, to the businesses which, through this pandemic, have felt left behind compared to other businesses. That is dominating the representations to my office from the sectors which have not been able to access the restart grant because it was for rate payers. They have not been able to access Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, and now the Covid-19 business aid scheme, CBAS, which is welcome and worthwhile, is perhaps out of reach for them. We are talking about people in the events industry, the travel industry and also, as was referred to by a colleague in another meeting, the traditional man or woman in the van, who does not have a solid business placing or anything comparable. While the current schemes are a hugely important support for businesses that qualify, for those who miss out, the loss is absolutely crushing. Many of these are small and family businesses. There is huge concern and I know there is huge societal concern. The costs are still coming in and many of the costs Deputy Flaherty referred to in relation to Brexit are devastating.

The last sector I wish to refer to and remind people of is the aviation industry. We get regular communications from pilots, the pilots' association and cabin crew. Supports are being provided at the moment. There is a pandemic unemployment payment for the individuals and airlines and airports are receiving support. However, it will most likely be one of the last sectors to open up, along with the entertainment industry. Will there be a sector to return to? As an isolated island nation, it is important we have a thriving aviation sector. I want to reaffirm its importance so those businesses, if they are able to tread water for now, will be able to reopen in due course.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We are expecting a new reopening plan, which will be welcome, but I have concerns because the latest scientific evidence is that Covid-19 will always be around, with vaccination. We may not see the same death rate and sickness but it is here to stay and we need to make sure our plans reflect that.

Much of the correspondence coming into my office is based on the last plan. I will give an example. Indoor and outdoor play centres were designated as open in level 3, but then closed in level 3 a few months ago. I am asked if they will be open in level 3 this time or if there will be a level 3 this time. This kind of last-minute change cannot occur again. We need to be clear with people if we are to take them with us on this plan. How is the Tánaiste's Department preparing to make very clear what will and will not be allowed to open? How can they open safely and under what grounds will they be closed again? Will there be clear messaging that this is a different plan?

The one thing that comes up over and over in my office is the unfairness on outlets, such as small essential services. They believe they have been left behind. The Tánaiste and I have spoken often about click and collect and I am aware the intention is not to have large numbers moving around. However, we have to find a way to support small businesses which cannot operate a full online service. As we are closer to the new plan this week than last week, will the Tánaiste tell me if click and collect will feature in the plan?

Another support from last year has raised concerns. I appreciate the Government introduced CRSS to provide 10% of last year's turnover, but this is not enough to pay one significant bill, rent or insurance costs for many businesses which are still closed. These bills still have to be paid. Are there proposals to revisit this?

Sticking with the theme of supports, I tabled a parliamentary question last month on whether the stay and spend scheme would be extended past its current termination of April 2021, given the current restrictions. I appreciate the scheme should not be viewed in isolation from other measures put in place to support businesses generally and the hospitality sector in particular but it was not usable at all really, since it only came into effect in October. The reply I received stated: “Stay and Spend is scheduled to operate until 30 April but the flexibility exists ... to extend its operation 2021 beyond that date (to end 2021).” At that stage, a decision will be made. I ask the Tánaiste to extend it. We are living with Covid now and encouraging people to stay home and go by the Covid guidelines, and rightly so. However, we need to make sure our hospitality sector is not forgotten. In doing that, we need to make sure we put more money into that area and I ask the Tánaiste to do that.

Deputy Kieran O’Donnell: I will use my time for a question and the Tánaiste might answer in the short time available. I have already flagged this issue to his office. It is about Rehab Enterprises in Limerick and concerns 37 jobs for people with disabilities, many of whom have been working there for many years. They receive supports through the wage subsidy scheme but they receive that over a long period, not specific to Covid. Are there any circumstances whereby such an enterprise may qualify for supports under Covid to ensure these jobs are maintained? These 37 people have worked there for many years. They and their families have been in touch with me. It is something I feel strongly about. People with disabilities are entitled, like everyone else, to be able to work. The Tánaiste might address that point.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Tánaiste might deal with that question and perhaps correspond on the other points if he cannot reach them.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: With regard to the redundancies at Rehab Enterprises Limited, the total number of people employed in Rehab Logistics Limerick is 37, 36 of whom are currently supported under the wage subsidy scheme for people with disabilities. It has now been proposed that the company will make 37 positions redundant. Over time, Rehab Logistics in Limerick has attempted to maintain its business. This has become increasingly difficult due to a number of factors, including difficulties in replacing contracts and changing market conditions. I am told the group will be engaging in a consultation process from 21 February to identify solutions and reach an agreement regarding the proposed redundancies. If a decision is taken to proceed with redundancies, Rehab will look at alternative arrangements for each employee, comprising identifying training opportunities or professional assistance to look for a new job.

As a Government, we recognise this is a vulnerable cohort of workers. The Department of Social Protection has worked closely with Rehab in similar circumstances and will do so again. That Department will assign a liaison person whose focus will be to ensure all the people affected will be directed to the appropriate supports and services available to them. The Department will work to ensure employees are able to access their entitlements swiftly and in a manner that does not cause any further distress.

An Ceann Comhairle: I take it the Tánaiste will correspond with Deputies Richmond, Flaherty and Murnane O’Connor.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Yes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy O’Rourke is sharing time with Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Darren O’Rourke: I raise the impact the pandemic has had on those working in

the aviation and travel sectors across Ireland. Covid-19 and its necessary restrictions have had a devastating impact on the sector. Protecting public health is the number one priority but we must also think of the essential role of aviation and travel. It employs 140,000 directly and indirectly and is vital to our island's connectivity and to our society and economy.

Without putting too fine a point on it, workers in the sector have no faith in a Green Party Minister to protect them. The Oireachtas committee is ably chaired by the Tánaiste's party colleague, the previous speaker, Deputy O'Donnell. The committee has engaged extensively with the Irish Air Line Pilots Association, IALPA, Fórsa, SIPTU, Connect and other unions in the sector. We have also met with the airports, airlines and travel agents, and to a man and woman, these organisations are adamant that better support for their industry is needed. They are calling for sector-specific supports to recognise the massive hit the aviation sector has suffered, direct State investment in airports and airlines, and a German-style support package for workers. They point towards the scale and type of supports in other countries. It is no coincidence that a number of speakers have raised this issue with the Tánaiste. I am encouraged by the responses so far. I ask that the Tánaiste would reaffirm that commitment to support the sector and the jobs within it, notwithstanding the challenges that are there.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I wish to bring up an issue I spoke about earlier. National Broadband Ireland, NBI, gave me a note on some issues it believes need to be sorted out around planning permits and such in terms of streamlining the roll-out of the national broadband plan. I have sent that note to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and expect him to come back with an answer. I have also sent it on to the Tánaiste's office for his information if he is going to engage with NBI.

I want to raise an issue I brought up previously with the Tánaiste. There are a huge number of firms and individuals who believed the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, and other supports would have been for them but they happened to fall between stools. In the past couple of hours, I have sent the Tánaiste a number of issues, particularly about two entertainment companies which still have huge overheads and a mobile food unit. In fairness, I did this on the basis that the Tánaiste said he had an interest in dealing with these issues. If we are not looking at a change regarding how the Covid-19 business aid scheme, CBAS, will be assessed, perhaps the Tánaiste could come back to me on whether he has any plans on a timeline regarding alternatives for these people who have fallen between stools.

It has also been brought to my attention by Dundalk Chamber of Commerce that the man in a van model is also failing. There is also an issue regarding the fact that the rates waiver assessment probably needs a greater level of flexibility. I would really appreciate if the Tánaiste could come back to me, especially with regard to an alternative to the CBAS and other supports.

An Ceann Comhairle: All this talk of sea bass is making me hungry.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I will make sure those notes to which Deputy Ó Murchú referred are brought to my attention. I am genuine in what I say about wanting to help out firms that are, perhaps, falling between the cracks and not receiving any help with fixed costs. It is always hard to design a scheme that works for everyone but we will do our best to design future schemes. The note the Deputy is going to send will be helpful in my engagement with NBI. I thank him for that as well.

With regard to aviation, and I do not necessarily mean anyone present in the House at the

moment when I say this, I believe there are people in this House who are trying to have it both ways, who call for radical climate action one day and massive supports for aviation the next, who call for aviation effectively to be halted through mandatory hotel quarantining for all, probably down to a handful of flights a day, and then oppose what the Government is trying to do, which is to maintain at least some degree of reasonable and essential travel, with testing, to the UK and Europe. That cannot hold forever. Either we are going to try to help aviation to survive with a certain degree of essential travel as safely as possible or we are not. Once we get into mandatory quarantine in hotels for all, it is very hard to see how aviation can return to any level of reasonable activity for quite some time. Who knows when it will even be possible?

The aviation sector is receiving much financial support from Government. The airlines are among the main beneficiaries of the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, receiving millions to help pay their staff. Aer Lingus has access to funding from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, and there have been indirect Government grants to Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, Shannon Airport and to the regional airports. That will continue but it cannot continue indefinitely if we do not allow people to fly again at some point when it is safe to do so.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am sharing time with Deputy Barry. Since the outbreak of the pandemic in March of last year, I have been advocating on behalf of two sectors that have been hit particularly hard - devastated - by the pandemic and pandemic measures. For the most part, they still remain excluded from the support schemes that have been set up. I requested that the Tánaiste meet with one of those groups, the taxi drivers, and he did so. They have explained their situation to him. Apart from a few weeks before Christmas, there is no work, or next to no work, out there for them. They are carrying costs of several hundred euro in insurance every week and several hundred euro, for the most part, in car repayments every month. They need assistance when there is no work out there for them. Many will exit the industry unless they get assistance. They have been excluded from the CRSS. They did not even get the restart grants and they are excluded from CBAS. Will the Tánaiste please give supports that will be made available to taxi drivers?

Regarding musicians and events and arts people who do not have premises, some musicians and events people are selling their equipment at the moment to sustain themselves. Their livelihoods literally are being destroyed. Again, they are being excluded because they do not have premises that are outward looking and instead are operating from a van or are paying off equipment they use. Will the Tánaiste please provide a scheme that will help them cover their fixed costs? They are being devastated.

Another small group of people I met, whom I know the Minister of State, Deputy English also met, are travel counsellors. The Government has an inward continuity business scheme for inward travel, but it does not extend to the travel counsellors because they organise travel going out of the country. However, they have fixed costs, for example, premium insurance, broadband, telephones and various other costs. I will not go through them. The costs add up to about €500 per week and they are still working but have no revenue at all coming in it because of Covid-19 restrictions. They ask that these schemes be made available to them or that there would be schemes to support them and cover those fixed costs.

3 o'clock

Will the Government please help these people?

18 February 2021

Deputy Leo Varadkar: These are areas under the remit of the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, but I am taking an interest in them. For the taxi industry, a package was put in place by the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, that is worth about €15 million. Also, in the budget the rules around the PUP were changed to allow people to continue to work and pick up fares while still drawing the PUP. We can give consideration to further schemes to support taxi drivers and I will take that up with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

On musicians, I know the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, is working on this already and is trying to develop a scheme for musicians. More information on fixed costs would be helpful. It is an area we are having difficulty getting more information on as to people who do not have a premises and what these fixed costs are. I know they are sometimes related to vehicles and more information on that would be helpful.

On travel counsellors, if they have an office they will qualify for the CBAS. If they work from home, they probably do not.

Deputy Mick Barry: Next Tuesday morning there will be a protest outside Topshop on Opera Lane in Cork city centre. The protest is being organised by ex-Arcadia workers. They are angry at their former employer because they have been cheated out of the two week's pay for every two years' service redundancy agreement they had in place with the company. They are not just angry with the company, however. They are very critical of the Government as well. They saw the Clery's workers being told that they were the last ones who would be forced to suffer in this situation. Then they saw the Debenhams' workers being promised the same and now it is their turn. Where is the legislation? The programme for Government said there would be legislation to improve worker's rights in a liquidation situation. We were told to expect it at Christmas, then during the new year and it is now the second half of February so what is the position on that? I will submit legislation on this issue myself if we do not see something very soon. Debenhams' workers rejected the offer by a 9:1 majority. Their struggle continues. In the nearest Debenhams' store to me, on Patrick Street in Cork, there is a daily picket even now. In other stores there is a watch on the stock. Workers have leverage here. There is stock in at least eight of the 11 stores and it will not move without a just settlement. There was an offer of €3 million for an upskilling fund. The shop stewards have asked that this money be transferred into a cash redundancy payment. I would like the Tánaiste to comment on that.

The European Commission has a draft directive for adequate minimum wages in EU member states and collective bargaining on a national scale, to be put in place where collective bargaining does not cover 70% of the workforce. The Tánaiste has written, along with representatives of eight other EU Governments, asking that this be diluted to a mere recommendation, something that would be worthless to workers in this country. His action will be cheered by every anti-trade union employer in the country. They know that keeping trade unions out and keeping workers from organising is key to keeping wages low, conditions below par and profits high. The Tánaiste signed that letter alongside representatives of far right Governments in Poland and Hungary. How does he explain that?

It is true, as the Tánaiste has said, that the decision has not been made on Ulster Bank but the decision will be made tonight. It is an open secret that NatWest will close Ulster Bank in this country. This includes 1.1 million customers, 89 bank branches and 2,800 workers, in a bank which has sent €3.5 billion in profit to NatWest in the UK in recent years. Does the Tánaiste

support what I support, which is legislation to stop the vultures getting their hands on the mortgage loan books? Does the Tánaiste support the idea that this bank should be nationalised to save jobs and to protect services?

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Tánaiste and the Ministers of State for their attendance and for the opportunity once again to discuss the business supports available during this pandemic. I have spoken before about the unprecedented supports given by Government, which have been warmly welcome and necessary for all those businesses. In particular, I mention the Covid restrictions support scheme, the employment wage subsidy scheme and the waiver of commercial rates.

The Tánaiste might outline further information about the Covid business aid scheme and when that information will be made available to businesses. There are outstanding issues with so-called orphan companies, which I have spoken about before, and the fact that they are falling between the cracks. I know the Government is examining this and I look forward to further updates on that.

As the vaccine programme is being rolled out and ramped up and as hope is returning to many businesses, people are telling me that they are beginning to look to the future. That said, the Government should use the next few weeks to examine the economic outlook and prepare a national restart plan. The current Covid supports will keep many businesses going over the coming months as they have done in recent months but there will be challenges for the economy as it begins to reopen. We know it will not be one big bang of a reopen and that has been said before. It will happen on a gradual basis and hopefully over the summer months. Many businesses have significant restart costs and as the different sectors begin to reopen they will need an injection of working capital. I ask the Tánaiste to begin preparations in this regard. If possible, an indication should be given in the Government's revised living with Covid plan. Businesses will need tapered supports while they look to reopen. Again, this should be signalled where possible and as early as possible. Early announcements such as costs of commercial rates would be welcome. Despite every support for some businesses, the landscape has changed and many will not be able to return as normal. I welcome the remarks of the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and the work he has done on the restructuring of businesses, which in some cases might have to examine an orderly wind-up, examinership or liquidation, and fast-track low-cost wind-ups or restructuring should be made easier, particularly after this pandemic.

In the time I have remaining, I ask the Tánaiste to come back to me afterwards on the online trading voucher. It has been popular, particularly in Dublin, but many people have told me that the programme has either been oversubscribed or that there are delays getting onto it. I know that €20 million was given to that but I would like an update on the uptake for that over the four Dublin local authorities.

Deputy John Lahart: I have a specific question that I am willing to accept a written answer on. It is on .ie domain names and the abuse of them by overseas operators. They are masquerading as Irish suppliers and then a person discovers that this business is operating from outside the jurisdiction. That has an impact on genuine .ie traders. I will make some points that will allow the Tánaiste some degree of stream of consciousness on the issue.

I saw that the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, was suggesting an additional tax on the likes of the Amazon's of this world, which have accumulated significant profits. I know this is not the Tánaiste's area but he is the equivalent of a Deputy Prime Minister so he

might have some thoughts on it. This phase of us dealing with the virus strikes me as probably being the one in which the Government is at its most powerless.

In terms of things like hospitality, when does the Tánaiste see a decision maybe being able to be made on Irish people being able to holiday within Ireland? Where do we need to get to in order to allow people to make plans?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: The Minister of State, Deputy Troy, might come in on the .ie domain names as he has responsibility for digital and company regulation but I think that is owned by University College Dublin. It is not Government controlled but I will come back to the Deputy on that.

I am always afraid to speculate about the future when it comes to what might or might not be possible this summer but I hope and believe that a domestic tourism season will be possible this summer. If one looks at where we got to last summer, we were down to low case numbers and that allowed people to travel around the country. We would need similar case numbers with a large number of people vaccinated.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: Earlier this week, I had a Zoom meeting with a number of musicians, artists, performers and dance teachers in my constituency. I am here to make a case for these performers, artists and individuals, who bring so much entertainment and creativity to our lives. I would like to start by providing the Tánaiste with a case study of one of the individuals I met earlier this week, to prove to him how much some of these businesses and individuals need financial supports. At this stage, it is over a year since most performers last worked at a concert, a show or an event of some form. They have not had a chance to work through no fault of their own and yet they are not receiving the supports they need to keep their heads above water financially.

One man who I met has a ten-piece band. He is both highly skilled in his area and highly educated, with both an undergraduate degree and a masters in music. He is a business owner, professional musician and technician. He formed his ten-piece band in 2008 and it quickly became one of the most in-demand bands in the country. They performed at countless weddings and corporate events all over the country, including at the Aviva Stadium and Electric Picnic. Seán lost 100% of his revenues in March 2020 and yet he has overheads he must keep up to, including insurance and a van loan, amounting to roughly €1,000 per month. This is a VAT-registered business. Seán employs nine other musicians on any given night and he pays PRSI on the musicians' wages. They are not a group of people who decide to meet up and play music just for the love of it. This is their livelihood. They all went to college, just like every other professional, to master their skills. They brought their business from strength to strength through hard work and dedication.

Seán states that since the beginning of the pandemic, his business has received absolutely no support because he does not have a rate-paying premises, and that 11 months later, having managed to survive on funds he had in the bank prior to the pandemic, his funds are running dry and he has no idea how his business will survive until his band can get back to work safely. He states that he, like any rate-paying business, pays his taxes and is registered for VAT. Unlike other rate-paying businesses, he receives no support. All he asks is that they are treated fairly, that they are not kicked to touch, and that they are treated as a viable business. Music, art and entertainment are at the heart of our culture. Businesses in this sector are asking for a level playing field like every other business. It is clear that if we do not support artists, such as

musicians, DJs, dancers and singers, we will see a major drainage of talent from this industry that will never return. I ask for these viable businesses and business people to be treated fairly and supported financially.

Finally, whenever we move out of this lockdown, it is important that dance schools be permitted to teach classes in socially distanced bubbles at level 3 and below. It is only fair that dance schools are treated the same as sport and other similar activities in this regard.

Deputy Brian Leddin: The Tánaiste has a deep commitment to entrepreneurship. We share a hope that once we have finally brought the pandemic under control, we will see a new generation of entrepreneurs come forward with innovative ideas to strengthen our economy. Entrepreneurs and small businesses played an important role in the previous economic recovery and they will play an equally important role in the recovery ahead.

My hope is that domestic tourism will take place at some stage this year and that we will gain a new appreciation of holidaying in our own country. This will bring opportunities for entrepreneurs, particularly in rural areas, to develop innovative new businesses to serve this growing market.

Unfortunately, it has been brought to my attention that some new businesses, such as e-bike hire companies, are completely shut out of the insurance market. These businesses, many of which are trying to service the new greenways around the country that the Government is funding, simply cannot get off the ground because they are new entrants and not a single insurance company will offer them cover. In particular, I have been in contact with entrepreneurs in Limerick and in Kerry who have been affected by this issue. I acknowledge the work of the Government and the Tánaiste's Department in tackling insurance reform. I appreciate that it is complex, and it requires action not only from the Parliament but from the Judiciary as well. I support the Tánaiste in removing the barriers faced by our brilliant entrepreneurs, who offer some of the brightest hopes for our country's future.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I thank Deputy Leddin for those supportive words. I am due to meet Insurance Ireland in the next couple of weeks and if the Deputy can pass me on a bit more detail about those e-bike companies on greenways, I will take it up with Insurance Ireland directly and see if something can be done in that regard. I would have thought it is an insurable risk that could be covered and I do not see why they cannot get insurance. We will help if we can.

I thank Deputy Cahill for his passionate remarks in support of people who work in the music and entertainment industry. The Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, is examining possible options for how we can help them out a bit more. The company that the Deputy describes should be eligible for the employment wage subsidy scheme to help with the wages of the staff and the members of the band. They should also be eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment, which is, as the Deputy will be aware, more than €1,000 a month. We do not provide income support or income replacement beyond that for anyone. It would not be fair to do it for one sector or affordable to do it for all. The Deputy mentioned issues around fixed costs. I can certainly see how a band that has a vehicle would have fixed costs that perhaps we can help with. The Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, is keen to do that and has met with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, and me about it. We will try to do something.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA,

gives increased rights to corporations, for instance, the right to sue sovereign states through corporate courts, but it does little for workers' rights. The ability of corporations to sue states will act as a major deterrent for using the state apparatus to counteract these negative effects. Taking the example of the minimum wage, Veolia, the giant French company, sued the Egyptian Government for increasing its minimum wage. Thankfully, the Egyptian Government won. Nevertheless, it incurred legal fees and arbitration costs of millions of dollars. The Government keeps telling us that CETA is good for the economy but an economy is made up of the workers within it. Can the Tánaiste explain how a treaty which permits corporations to sue the state for a minimum wage increase is good for workers and, by extension, the economy, and can give specific details in relation to that?

We are awaiting the publication of the Duffy report on the pay and terms and conditions of workers in the early years sector. I would hope that this would be the pathway to professionalise the sector given how crucial these workers have been during the pandemic. A recent SIFTU survey showed that 90% of early years workers struggle to make ends meet. Given that the Government brought in the wage subsidy scheme, this could be a perfect opportunity to expand this further and give appropriate wages for the sector. Has any consideration been given to this?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: If I ever heard a red herring argument against CETA, that is one. First of all, companies can sue states. Companies sue states and governments all the time. One can go down to the commercial court and see many examples of companies suing the State. It does not mean they are successful. If the best example Deputy Farrell can come up with as an argument against CETA is that a company sued the Egyptian Government - nothing at all to do with CETA - for raising the minimum wage and lost its case, all I can say is that I have never heard a more specious argument against CETA than something like that.

Deputy Robert Troy: The only point I would add is that CETA has been in operation in this country for the past two and a half years. As a result, we have seen a significant increase in trade between Ireland and Canada which has been of major benefit to many companies, not only multinational companies to which the Deputy alluded but SMEs as well.

A decision has been taken at Government level to refer this trade agreement to an Oireachtas committee. There is no issue, good, bad or indifferent, with having this debated. Its merits stand up for themselves. In fact, it baffles me that people talk about rushing through this agreement. When the agreement was put before the Business Committee, nobody raised a flag and stated that this was being discussed too quickly. All of a sudden, it is being discussed too quickly. There is no issue. It will be referred to an Oireachtas committee. We will have a robust debate. Certainly, from my perspective, I will have no issue in voting for it because I see the merits of the agreement.

Deputy Pauline Tully: One of the sectors hardest hit throughout this pandemic has been that of those involved in the entertainment business. People involved in entertainment pay their taxes and contribute to society, not only financially. Since March, most people in the entertainment business have been unable to work due to venues being closed, weddings being practically cancelled or at least whittled down where they are not allowed to have entertainment either in the church or at the celebration afterwards, and functions or dinner dances not taking place. Even funerals were not allowed to have live music due to numbers. Events of all types and sizes were not allowed to proceed. We all understand the reason for this but many of those involved in the entertainment business are finding it very hard to make ends meet. Initially, they were granted the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, of €350 only to have it cut back

even though they could not return to work. As many of them do not have premises on which they pay rates, they were not eligible for many of the grants or schemes that were announced for businesses. I hoped the CBAS, which was announced two weeks ago, would fill a void and help those who were ineligible for the earlier grants or schemes. I wish to ask a number of questions about it. Does one need a rateable business premises to apply? It has been indicated that a business's turnover needs to have fallen by 75% or more in order to apply. That seems high. What about companies whose turnovers have fallen by 70%, 65% or even 50%? Are they ineligible or can they apply for some sort of support? Are the supports backdated? Many of the people we are talking about have not worked in almost a year and have accumulated large debts in that time.

We all hope that life will return to normal as the vaccination programme rolls out. I also hope that the entertainment sector can return to normal. However, clarity is needed and a plan may have to be put in place now if that is to happen. The wedding industry contributes approximately €2 billion to the economy when everything is taken into account. Many small businesses and self-employed people are struggling. They might be in receipt of the PUP and all payments, grants and so on are welcome, but they are not sufficient for everyone. People still have to pay their mortgages and living expenses as well as cover their insurance and business overheads, which has always been difficult for them.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Minister and Ministers of State might correspond with the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I would like to leave some of my four minutes so that the Tánaiste can reply. The harsh impact of Covid-19 will not vanish when we finally suppress the virus. The landscape of our lives will be forever altered by the pandemic. Not everyone will win the battle for survival and there will be casualties.

Local newspapers have been hit badly by events. The economic downturn in 2008 was the first blow, followed by advertisers switching their budgets to online platforms. Within two years, 16 local newspapers were forced to close. Newspaper titles across the country have been swallowed up in a form of centralised ownership, which has led to rationalisation. Staff have been temporarily laid off for extended periods. Others have been placed on reduced time. Those who continue to work are doing so under severe pressure as they strive to maintain quality. We must appreciate the importance of professional journalism.

Local newspapers are caught in a vicious cycle. Their primary source of income from advertising is rapidly drying up, their readership is dwindling because sports and local events are not happening, and they are struggling to hold their place against the growing popularity of the tech giants, which have increased their hold on people during the pandemic. Local radio, which provides a similar service to communities across the country, has been allocated €5 million to support Covid coverage. Local newspapers have received no direct support. They have been excluded from valuable Government Covid campaigns despite the knowledge that local newspapers are the news source of choice for the older population.

Newspapers are facing the greatest deadline in the history of print media. They need urgent financial support, but any support granted should not be used to bolster the coffers of the media corporations. It should be linked to editorial investment. It must be directed towards maintaining the position of journalists and staff. It is the staff who bring the news and the stories to the public and they need and deserve recognition. They need practical financial support to protect

their futures. Without support, one of our greatest and proudest local services will disappear. I am asking for Government intervention. We cannot allow the provincial printing presses to stop.

I hope that, with the vaccination roll-out, we will be in a better position in August and September. As we all know, the tourism industry is on its knees and will not survive on staycations alone. Many in the sector have told me that staycations will not allow them to sustain their businesses for the year. Have discussions taken place on the possibility of introducing a Europe-wide Covid immunisation document, in other words, a vaccination passport? This should be considered for later in the year to help our tourism industry.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Matters relating to tourism and the media are mainly under the remit of the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin. She would probably be able to give the Deputy a better reply than me, but I will do the best I can with the knowledge I have.

Regarding local newspapers and radio, newspapers have benefited from the reduction in the VAT rate to 9%. It was never increased for them. They can benefit from the wage subsidy scheme if their turnover is down. We have put in place some financial support for local radio. However, the underlying problem is the fact that the world is changing and sales of newspapers, both local and national, are down. Their advertising income is also down because people are advertising in different ways. While we are always open to providing extra support for local radio, newspapers and journalism, there comes a point where we must ask ourselves how much taxpayers' money are we willing to put behind newspapers that people do not read in large numbers anymore and that people do not advertise in anymore. It is a sad situation, but a great deal of the media will move fully online in future. That is the way the world is going.

Regarding immunisation documents and passports, when the time comes - I do not know when that will be - the key to restoring a great deal of travel, including international travel, will be how people prove that they have been vaccinated and-or tested negative. We have an immunisation document with a QR code on it ready that people will get to show that they have been immunised. Other countries, for example, Israel, are using such documents so that people who hold them do not have to self-isolate. The same applies with the travel bubble that Israel has set up with Cyprus and Greece, but we in Europe are not at that point yet. The science does not yet say that being vaccinated is enough to prove that someone cannot get the virus and pass it on, but I hope that we will get there.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: Earlier, I raised the issue of the banks that were refusing to honour approvals in principle for house mortgages to employees whose employers had availed of the Government's temporary wage scheme. I am dealing with many constituents in the Dundalk area who are affected by this approach. As the Tánaiste knows, the taxpayers paid and continue to pay a heavy price for the help the banks received during the financial crisis. For banks to behave in this manner now is disgraceful. I am working with many young people, including those with young families, who have done everything that has been asked of them to get a mortgage. They have made and continue to make great sacrifices in order to get approved for a mortgage. They have saved to ensure that they have the correct amount for a deposit, sourced a home and, in many cases, paid a holding deposit. They have given notice to their landlords and just when they are ready to complete their home purchases, the banks renege on their loan approval. This is a serious situation and one that the Government needs to address. To renege on a loan offer because a worker's employer has availed of a Government scheme is not only morally wrong, but surely the banks are breaching some code of practice by doing this. I am

pleading with the Government to intervene in this matter.

Since the onset of this terrible pandemic, it has become clear that many workers must plan on working from their homes on a more permanent basis. Having spoken to many people who used to travel to Dublin and other areas for their jobs but who now work from home, it is clear that there are many challenges. One of the main challenges they face is that of a suitable workspace in their homes. In the initial periods of the lockdown, many of those who worked from home did so from their kitchen tables or living rooms. While this was okay for a short time, it now poses many issues. In order to create a productive work environment, they need a proper workspace in their homes. I know from speaking to many of these workers that they would embrace the option of converting a small space in their homes for work purposes. The challenge they face is the financial cost. In order to create these workspaces, they will need proper facilities, including desks and chairs, fit-for-purpose network systems and adequate lighting.

The new reality we are facing is that workers will more and more continue to work from home and we must support them. The best way to support them is to encourage employers to make a financial contribution to their workers in order to convert a section of their homes into workspaces. The employer could be encouraged and supported in doing this through a Government scheme. The benefits of this support are much greater than the financial costs. We would see less traffic on our roads, meaning less pollution. People would be more productive because they would no longer have to endure a daily commute that in some cases can amount to four hours. This is an important opportunity for the Government to make a real difference to people's working conditions.

I wish to raise the issue of banks charging negative interest rates on deposits. This is a problem that will emerge over the coming months. It is not only a problem for those who are fortunate enough to have large sums on deposit, but also for the many small savers around the country. I am talking specifically about the thousands of savers in the credit unions. Although it has not been confirmed, I am led to believe that credit unions, which mainly have their customers' deposits with mainstream banks, will be hit badly. This will undoubtedly lead to charges being imposed on their savers. That is wrong. In the traditional banking system, a bank used its deposits to loan to other customers, thereby making a profit on the difference between the interest charged on the loan and the interest paid on the deposit. Now, it appears that these banks are saying that they have too much money on deposit and, therefore, are not in a position to pay interest. How is this the case when I have spoken to so many small and medium enterprises which tell me daily the difficulties they have obtaining credit facilities from local banks? There is something not right about this.

Another area that will affect people is the operation of solicitors' clients accounts. As the Tánaiste knows, these accounts are, in effect, only transaction accounts. The solicitors use these accounts to hold clients' sales and purchase funds, mainly from buying and selling property. The president of the County Louth Solicitors Bar Association has written to me in this regard and outlined the difficulties solicitors will face with these new charges. It is clear the approach taken by the banks in this regard is a very blatant profit-making exercise. I would like the Tánaiste to address these issues. Should he not have enough time I would appreciate it if he could ask his officials to respond in writing.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Tánaiste has no time. I call Deputy Durkan, who is sharing time.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak on this particularly important debate and I congratulate the Tánaiste and his fellow Ministers on the work they have done in addressing the issues that have arisen in the context of Covid. A number of issues have been raised by others, which I do not intend to go through in detail, whereby some of the employment sectors have fallen between the cracks and will require another look. The important time that will come in this will be later. This will be when we see the possibility of the economy opening up again. It is at that time that particular attention will have to be paid to those entrepreneurs and business people who were in business before, had flourishing businesses and know the ropes. They know how to set up a business and run it. They know what the risks are and will be in a position to be able to proceed at short notice. They will also have to rely on the availability of various lending from the banks, which it is hoped will be forthcoming, and I expect this will be a crucial issue in terms of the recovery of the economy.

The Kerry Group has already been mentioned and I acknowledge that it has a huge investment in County Kildare. It gives tremendous employment to the county, the country and globally. I have no doubt that the minimal losses in terms of jobs will be restored at the earliest opportunity.

We have spent considerable time in the finance committee dealing with the issue of Ulster Bank. There is a huge network of Ulster Bank branches across the midlands, much more so than in any other part of the country. Across the midlands in particular it is hugely important for supplying credit to businesses, mortgage holders and a plethora of people who are very important in the creation of opportunities in the economy. The bank would not meet the committee. It refused to do so. We did not want to indulge in the exposure of any state secrets but it would have been an opportunity for the committee and the Houses of the Oireachtas to advise the bank as to the importance of maintaining a strong presence. As the Acting Chairman knows, I could go on for quite a long time but we have to leave space for others.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I have been speaking to Waterford businesses and chambers of commerce in the city and Dungarvan and I have been struck by the similarities in the Covid stories as well as the differences that have been related to us. There is great appreciation for the supports that were put in place for businesses during the pandemic. I have listened to stories of small and medium enterprises that have used online training vouchers, business continuity grants or restart grants to innovate, remain open or get back on their feet, and this is most welcome. However, a significant issue, which has already been raised with regard to the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, remains. While the new Covid business aid scheme, CBAS, is welcome, a number of businesses are still falling through the cracks, in particular those operating from non-rateable premises. This particular feature of the CRSS is hitting a specific sector of business which comprises small home-based entrepreneurs. These include therapists, caterers, interior designers, crafters and start-ups that operate from home. They are falling through the cracks in the CRSS, along with photographers, event organisers, consultants and trainers. They are missing out on this vital safety net available to others because they do not pay rates.

We need to keep in mind that one size does not fit all when it comes to business supports during this pandemic. Within retail, for example, and perhaps operating within stereotype, I hear from bike shops that are struggling to get bikes and spare parts due to a spike in demand, alongside production and distribution issues coming as a result of Brexit and Covid. Other retailers never raised cash flow to restock for 2021 because they still have seasonal stock from 2019 on their shelves.

Our entrepreneurs are facing challenges that are unexpected and unique to Covid. One Waterford business owner to whom I have been speaking sources one component of her product from China. She has seen courier charges on this product treble. This is having a serious impact on her margin. This increase in the courier charges is because of the reduction in freight capacity owing to the increase in shipping of personal protective equipment. This filters down the line to small and medium enterprises, resulting in cash flow issues and difficulties with projections and costings which, as the Tánaiste knows, are the basic foundations of running a business.

We need to recognise that one size does not fit all with businesses. Is it possible to make specific provision for businesses that operate from premises which do not qualify for rates so they are not further excluded by CRSS and left behind? Is it possible to look at an option for people in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment to do some casual work without losing this payment? We have this already within the arts sector but we need to extend it. To give a specific example, if a business wants to cater for a wedding and wants to hire back its own well-trained staff for the day, it is difficult to do so because it impacts directly on the employees' pandemic unemployment payments. Is it possible to nurture home-based business and home-based entrepreneurs so they can weather this storm, reboot their businesses and rehire their staff as, it is hoped, we emerge from the pandemic?

Deputy James O'Connor: I welcome the announcement of the Covid business aid scheme. The €60 million funding will greatly help those businesses that have fallen outside the scope of CRSS requirements. The scheme will be a great help to businesses in the hospitality sector if they do not qualify for CRSS, if they have rateable premises and their turnover is significantly impacted. The Fáilte Ireland business continuity scheme, which was launched recently, is also a positive move protecting those businesses that have fallen outside the remit of CRSS. This is critical if we are to have a balanced approach during the return of normality for businesses and to ensure some sectors are not left behind.

I want to raise the issue of the credit guarantee scheme. I welcome the news that several credit unions have signed up to distribute the credit from the scheme. We need to have as many channels as possible to ensure all businesses that require credit can access it. However, if we are serious about building back better, we need to have the foresight to have the necessary tools in place to be a leader and market creator from a Government perspective. The role of the Government should be on market correction policies and more focus should be on shaping the future in a stakeholder-driven approach with businesses and wider society. Giving more power to the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, would also be a great first step. The SBCI should have the ability to administer its own loans directly to businesses instead of the current system that sees either the companies assessed by the SBCI and processed by the commercial banks or directly assessed by the commercial banks. As we can see from the KfW scheme in Germany, on which the SBCI is modelled, if we want our strategic investments to be successful for the Government to play a dynamic role in the development of an economy, we need to give the SBCI the direct tools to do this. I would like to hear from the Tánaiste his thoughts on this suggestion.

In recent times, we have seen significant discussion on the arrival of Amazon with regard to its logistics operations being based in Ireland instead of the UK for the first time. One suggestion I have is that the Department looks into ways in which local entrepreneurs could exploit this opportunity. It would be a shame if we did not do so. It might help to mitigate the negative impacts of online shopping it may have.

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Deputy Leo Varadkar: Some of these issues were raised and answered earlier and I do not want to use up my time giving the same answers again. When it comes to the pandemic unemployment payment people are allowed to do some work and not lose the payment. I do not think it is just restricted to musicians. I think it is more general. Off the top of my head, I think people can earn up to as much as €480 a month and still retain the pandemic unemployment payment but I will double-check it. Certainly the Department of Social Protection can do it for us.

Home-based businesses are eligible for the employment wage subsidy scheme, and those who run them or work in them are also eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment. They are not eligible for CRSS or CBAS because they are for fixed costs. The general view is that people who have a home business make not have very large fixed costs. They will have some but they might not be that large, although in some cases that probably is not the case, especially if people have vehicles. We are open to schemes that might help vehicle-based businesses and home-based businesses with their fixed costs. We need to be very clear the schemes the Government puts in place are to help with fixed costs, not to compensate for lost profits or income.

On the Deputy's suggestion on Amazon, it is investing significantly in Ireland. It employs thousands of people and is building new logistics centres here. We should seize the opportunity to encourage more Irish-based producers and companies to get on Amazon. It is something I will take up with its representatives the next time I meet them.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I want to ask the Minister a number of questions and I ask for the replies in writing. Last week, I raised the issue of the importation of cars and other goods, and the major delays at ports which are shocking. Duty and VRT has to be paid.

Another issue has now arisen, namely, the three-year-old goods relief being allowed by Revenue for cars re-entering the EU from 31 December 2020 back to 1 January 2018. There was no problem for the first two years of the scheme, but Revenue is now demanding a copy of an importation licence from when the car was first imported into the EU. It is not possible to get such shipping documentation. That needs to be sorted out. The Minister also needs to deal with the issue of stamp duty, which is holding up lorries at the border for a long time.

The Minister might pass on thanks to officials in Tipperary County Council who have been very helpful with the schemes operating for businesses. As other Deputies said, many fall outside those schemes, including those aged over 66 years, musicians and entertainers. Trudi Lawlor and Billy Morrissey, along with other musicians, have come together to start a wonderful initiative. Musicians and entertainers ring fans to talk to them. They are looking for support because it has taken off beyond all belief. It is a great initiative. Something like that falls between the cracks of the Department of the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The initiative needs to be developed and enhanced.

Will restart grants be available again? The money has run out and it is due to start again. People need continuity and services.

Something must be done about insurance and the banks, which are not functioning properly. They are not allowing people to do what they should do. We saw the bravery of the four individuals who took the case against FBD. They should not have had to do that. Dealing with such matters is the job of the Government.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I have a number of questions. There are terrible delays for busi-

nesses in respect of imports. I have been contacted by a number of businesses based in the midlands and have been told that there are terrible delays with customs. A customs agent has to be engaged for each transaction, which costs €80. Prior to that, an invoice has to be obtained in the UK and that can be delayed by up to four days. There is also pettiness with customs officers here who, I have heard, have taken sandwiches from drivers coming in from the UK. This sort of pettiness and bureaucracy has to be dealt with.

We need to protect every job we can in this State, in particular given Brexit and the pandemic. This is particularly important in the midlands which is undergoing a very unfair transition, as I have said a number of times in the House. I ask the Minister to please sort out the imports and customs issues. It appears that the problems lie mostly on our side.

My next issue is Ulster Bank. Will the Minister give certainty and clarity to people? Some 20,000 farmers have loans with Ulster Bank, and many customers have mortgages. They need certainty that the loan books will not be passed to a faceless entity, namely, a vulture fund. We need to ensure the loan books are passed to another pillar bank. In terms of putting people here at ease, the Minister needs to clarify that. I would be very grateful for a written reply so I can get back to my constituents.

My next issue concerns businesses in my constituency, Laois-Offaly. A tree surgeon received a quote from an insurance company of roughly €2,700 over eight years. He has now been told that because of Brexit the insurance cost is between €10,000 and €15,000, enough to put him out of business. I ask for that case to be looked into.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: In August last year a company sent information to the Ceann Comhairle, who gave it to the superior officer, regarding a high performance air cleaner. We have constantly said we are looking for more time to talk in a safer environment and way. The officials did their job and reverted to the company that manufactured the high performance air cleaner. The Government has sat on this since September.

A quote for 40 units was sought. I will not mention the company's name because it would not be fair to do so. The Government received all of the information in September. We had enough for 200 units. The Oireachtas would need 40 units and the rest could have gone to front-line services. We do not have a vaccine for people. We have discussed how to get people back to work safely and make sure that things can be done safely.

A product is available which is used in Germany. It was used in hospitals in Cork yesterday and by Garda services in Ireland. The Government has not replied to the company since September. Some €1.2 million has been spent for us to talk in the Convention Centre, when we could have units in Covid centres to protect front-line services. Why has the Government not replied to the company? It is science. The machines are effective for up to 100,000 microparticles floating in the air. We all know that Covid is airborne. We all wear masks. A unit is available to protect front-line workers and other staff, and the Government has not replied to it. I want to know why.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the opportunity to bring a number of matters to the attention of the Minister and I hope I will leave him enough time to respond to one or two of them. I appreciate the supports that have been introduced – one could not help but appreciate them – including the PUP, EWSS and CRSS. Without those, businesses would be completely gone.

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I refer to loan forbearance. The Minister may recall that during the first lockdown the CEOs of Ireland's five retail banks met the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, and a five-point plan was laid out. One part of the plan involved loan forbearance which would not affect the credit rating of businesses. It was a very good initiative. I understand such a scheme is not in place. I have been contacted by small businesses and hotels that require loans without their credit rating being affected. I know it is not the area of responsibility of the Minister, but is it something he has raised with the Minister for Finance?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I will have to check with the Minister for Finance, but my understanding is that if a bank gives somebody a payment break that does not affect his or her credit rating. I will double check that. We no longer have blanket payment breaks for everyone who requests them. People have to need them. My understanding is that once it is granted, it does not affect a person's credit rating. I will check the position.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I would appreciate if the Minister would check that, because that is not my understanding from the businesses that have contacted me. They specifically mentioned AIB, which told them they need a clear directive from the Government on such action not affecting a business's credit rating. The Minister can appreciate that a credit downgrade has a hugely negative effect on any businesses. It is a specific net point.

I welcome the coach tourism business continuity scheme, but, as other speakers said, smaller niche companies fall outside of it. I am thinking in particular of buses on the Aran Islands. They do not come within the restricted criteria of that scheme, such as buses in use before July 2013. Such businesses would not have a turnover of €50,000 year. It is a small niche industry.

The Minister may recall that before Christmas I drew a matter to his attention, namely, the very good spending review carried out by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. The Minister told me he would read it over Christmas. I am not sure whether he did but I hope he did. It drew to our attention that bespoke solutions are required in addition to what the Department has introduced, which I acknowledge are very good. We also need bespoke industries. In particular, the review pointed out that industry in the Gaeltacht was going to be particularly impacted by both Covid and Brexit. The other startling fact is that 85% of the clients of Údarás na Gaeltachta are micro enterprises with fewer than ten employees, and 99% of its clients are small to medium enterprises employing fewer than 250 people. I mention that because it is the bread and butter. The annual report from Údarás na Gaeltachta this year shows that employment has been affected by 6% to 8%, net. More significantly, there is a 30% drop in the tourism area. The small niche industries such as the one I mentioned need bespoke solutions. I am drawing that to the Minister's attention - I am not asking for an answer now - in the context of the importance of the Gaeltacht, the Irish language and small enterprises.

I welcome the tourism business continuity scheme through Fáilte Ireland, but it took an effort to get it. It was announced in the budget. One of the two businesses in Killary that have been in contact with us is delighted with it, theoretically, but then there is the amount of time it is taking to get the cash. I understand that not a single euro will be handed over until March. Again, this is positive, but it is not quick enough.

There are also the travel agents. I will mention one in Galway because she is the last woman standing. I was going to say the last man standing. We are in level 5 and if we were in level 4, the travel agents would qualify. In the other levels they qualify for nothing. The Tánaiste might address the issue of travel agents. I realise he is keen on online banking and so forth,

but many of us like travel agents. We like to walk into the premises, and it gives employment. There is trust and reliability. They need certainty. They have done their best, and for most of this time they have been working, partly paid and partly not paid, and giving refunds. Perhaps the Tánaiste will comment on the travel agency sector.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: As the Deputy correctly pointed out, travel agents qualify in levels 4 and 5, but would not if we went to level 3. I believe they should because in level 3 one must stay in one's county. Logically, hotels and travel agents should continue to receive CRSS if they are in level 3. I am currently arguing this with the Revenue Commissioners and the Minister, Deputy Donohoe. However, even if they do not qualify, they could apply for the new CBAS in that scenario.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Finally, there is the issue of the trading online voucher. The Tánaiste did not get a chance to respond on this earlier when another Deputy raised it. Again, there has been excellent uptake of the voucher. I understand that Údarás na Gaeltachta ran out of money, so the local enterprise office, LEO, in Galway took over. Will the Tánaiste comment on the trading online voucher? It is working and people are taking it up, but the money is not there.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the failure to introduce legislation to protect workers in the case of Debenhams, Clerys prior to that and now the Arcadia workers. I have to mention it because I see them in Galway and it is just unacceptable. Perhaps the Tánaiste will comment on the trading online voucher in the remaining 22 seconds.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: That is a complicated area which we will return to at another time. I am not convinced that any of the legislative solutions Members have put forward would have made a difference or would make a difference in those scenarios. It is worthwhile to read the report of the chairman of the Labour Court on that.

The Minister of State, Deputy English, might assist me regarding the trading online voucher. I think there is additional funding for it.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): There were in excess of 13,000 applications last year and we hope to build on that this year. The funding is allocated through our Department as the Department has responsibility for the policy. There is also another round of the online retail scheme that is operated by Enterprise Ireland. It is hoped that will be announced during February or early in March.

Land Development Agency Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Mick Barry: I am sharing time with Deputy Paul Murphy.

We are discussing the new Land Development Agency Bill 2021, which will open the door to privatisation of public land. Arguably, this may open the door to the largest privatisation in the history of the State. The only example I can think of that might rival it, and time will tell, is the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, where there was a €43 billion sell-off. The Tánaiste said some time ago that the launch of the Land Development Agency was comparable to the launch of Aer Lingus and the launch of the ESB in the past. Nothing could be further

from the truth. Those instances saw the establishment of State agencies. I have criticisms of both, but they provided good employment and a service to the people of the State over many decades. The Land Development Agency is the opposite, if anything. This is a quango that will open the door to mass privatisation of public land banks.

Under this legislation the control over land banks and the disposal of assets is taken out of the hands of elected councillors, which is an extremely anti-democratic move, to facilitate privatisation. The Minister will object and undoubtedly will say that 50% of the housing built on those lands will be affordable. He was only forced to concede the 50% under the pressure of public opinion. The original plan was for less than that. However, the Bill does not define what is affordable. Is it a percentage of a person's income? It does not say. In practice, at present, affordable housing in the State is calculated on the basis of market prices minus, for example, €50,000. That is far from affordable for young people, the low paid and many middle-income workers. A tiny percentage of the new housing on these lands will be social or council housing, despite the fact there are tens of thousands of people on the social housing lists throughout the country. A large portion of the housing built on these lands will be for profit at the full market rates, which is completely outside the scope of the ordinary worker.

I will look at the example of what will happen at the Cork docklands. This is public land. There is the old Ford site, the ESB marina sites and the lands at Páirc Uí Chaoimh, Kent Station, the National Oil Reserves Agency, Marina Park, Camp Field and Tivoli docks. These are public lands and they should be used for public housing. It is planned to build 25,000 new homes over a period of 20 years. This should be housing for people, not for profit. It should be 100% social and affordable housing. There are thousands of people on the Cork City Council and Cork County Council housing waiting lists who would benefit from that. There are many workers on the average wage, low paid workers and young workers who would benefit from genuinely affordable housing, in other words, cost price or close to it. Instead, there will be housing for profit. It will be housing at full market rates and housing at so-called affordable prices, which in reality are unaffordable for the majority, with just a sprinkling of social housing.

We will not be able to get to the bottom of what is happening because the designated activity companies in partnership with the speculators will not be subject to freedom of information legislation. That is a disgrace. We will fight tooth and nail against the measures in this Bill.

4 o'clock

We are pro-housing, but housing for people not for profit.

Deputy Paul Murphy: They say a leopard never changes its spots and Fianna Fáil does not change its character. It has always been, and remains, a party of the big developers and big builders. We have three proofs of that this week alone. First is the ESRI research which confirms what the left has said about the supposed affordable housing schemes, that their effect will be to push up house prices to make houses even more unaffordable for ordinary workers and to line the pockets of developers. Second is the Government's drive to re-open construction, putting construction workers and the wider community in danger and prolonging the lockdown as a consequence. Third is this legislation, which represents an attempted mass giveaway of public land. The Land Development Agency is nothing other than the mass privatisation of our public lands through the backdoor. It completely wrecks the very limited local democracy that we have. Currently one of the very few powers that elected councillors have is that they can veto the sell-off of public land. Now that is to be scrapped and instead the power to sell off

lands will be handed to an unelected and ultimately unaccountable bureaucracy. It is a recipe for dodgy dealings outside of the public eye, not subject to the regular Freedom of Information scrutiny. I have no doubt that if the Government manages to push this Bill through, the LDA will be at the heart of major national scandals in the future, just like NAMA was.

All of this is in order to provide cover for what will amount to massive handouts to big private property developers whose interest this Government politically represents. This privatisation agenda should be rejected. Public land should not be handed over to developers, it should be used to build public and genuinely affordable housing for all.

Looking at how the LDA will work, under the proposed legislation, it can do a survey of public lands and pick and choose the most potentially profitable lands it wants. At that point, its task is to develop this land however it sees fit, including handing it over to private for-profit developers. In fact, it is instructed to avoid what the legislation refers to as “undue segregation on the basis of social background”. Anyone who has been around long enough to hear and know Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael’s anti-social housing mantra knows that that is a code phrase for privatisation of public land by pushing anti-social housing. It is telling that in the mandate there is no mention whatever of social housing. The Government is moving away entirely from the building of social housing, council housing, towards public private partnerships. The plan is for lucrative contracts to be given out to private developers. We will see more O’Devaney Gardens-type plans with private for-profit houses built on public land but these are likely to be even worse, with the LDA not subject to the same public pressure as councillors.

The community of Moyross in Limerick recently saw first hand exactly what the LDA is like. It seems it intervened recently to try to overturn long existing plans for the area which had been demanded by the community but the LDA felt it knew better. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, said he wanted to bring it in “for the best interest of the Moyross area” and did not seem to care what the actual residents thought. The result was outrage among the community with the Moyross Residents Forum decrying this as a coup and the local priest writing a stinging letter accusing the LDA and the Minister of a massive betrayal. After the uproar it seems the Government has retreated somewhat but there is still talk of part of the land to be given over to a private hospital as part of the development of the area. Working class communities do not need another white knight with some plan developed over the heads of the residents or some privatisation scheme; they need democratic, community control and public investment to build public homes on public land.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I welcome the Land Development Agency Bill and thank the Minister, Deputy Darragh O’Brien for his work on it and the former Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, for all he did previously. We can all agree that housing is one of the most pressing emergencies facing the country. This Bill offers real opportunity to deliver the affordable homes that we so desperately need. This year we will see the largest investment in housing in the history of the State. This is a huge opportunity to make a real difference to people of my generation.

The investment from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, of up to €1.25 billion coupled with the potential to borrow another €1.25 billion, is very significant. It gives a potential €2.5 billion of spending. That’s not just a great statement of intent but a real show of real financial backing. The LDA is the Government putting its money where its mouth is. The fact that it is being given such wide-reaching compulsory purchase order, CPO, powers means this will be a body with teeth.

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Yesterday the Minister confirmed his intention for the LDA to use its CPO powers to purchase primarily private lands, for site assembly purposes, through agreement with private landowners. This is something which should be welcomed by parties of the left, because it takes power from developers, uses land that has effectively been frozen by stagnation and delivers homes for people who need them. However, cynically, there has been no welcome. I welcome the Government's commitment to delivering sites as soon as possible and getting people into affordable homes as quickly as possible.

As we are all aware, one of the biggest issues facing the housing market has been the chronic lack of affordable housing. This was the number one issue in my constituency during the last election and is the number one issue for people my age. In fact, the housing market and affordability issues have created a situation where the average age of first-time buyers is now 35 years, a whole decade older than in the 1980s.

I know first-hand from my own friends and constituents in Dublin Mid-West that the lack of housing is a serious worry and creating serious anxiety, particularly in the areas like Lucan and Clondalkin. Everyone deserves a place that they can call home and, crucially, a home that they can afford. The biggest roadblock to progress is often ideology but for the 4,000 people on the South Dublin County Council housing list and those caught in the rip-off rental trap, ideology is irrelevant, what they want is a home to call their own. The Land Development Agency Bill has the potential to deliver that. It will allow us to transform idle State-owned land sustainably into thriving communities and provide affordable homes through affordable purchase and cost rental schemes.

Last year the Simon Community recommended that Government intervention was needed to tackle the shortage of homes, stabilise the housing market and keep families in their homes to stop the flow into homelessness. I believe that this Bill will help us address each of these problems. We must make the most of State-owned land that is currently unused or under-used. This Bill does that. It sets out to make sure that State-owned land which is determined as appropriate for housing development does not lie idle in the middle of a housing crisis.

I also welcome the commitment to building sustainable communities for future generations by adhering to best environmental practice. In the context of the global climate change crisis it is so important that the Government puts an environmental focus on new developments and an eco-slant on all our policies. Our housing crisis requires resourceful and creative solutions and I think this Bill will deliver on both.

I will address some of the points made by the Opposition today and yesterday. First, it is important to note that the LDA will deliver a minimum of 50% affordable housing on public land in addition to 10% social housing. Second, I am pleased that the LDA's commercial activities will be subject to the Freedom of Information Acts and the plan is also to incorporate it under the lobbying register to ensure full transparency. Listening to the last speaker, one would be forgiven for thinking that was not the case. Third, while it is correct that there is no one size fits all definition of affordability, either in the Bill or in reality, it is critical to understand that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage will set the definition of affordability by local authority area, on a case-by-case basis. While it is important that we future proof this Bill we also need to be realistic about whether it will be moved off balance sheet. It is vital that sites are bought at a discounted price. That is the way we will ensure they are developed at a truly affordable rate.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to ensuring that the Land Development Agency, LDA, will pay the affordable land value, not the full market value. I would like to see us further explore how to achieve the best possible price. The LDA will have first refusal on all State land. That is critical to ensuring that public land remains public land. I appreciate that the market value must be in keeping with EU state aid requirements but it is vital that the LDA is able to purchase sites at a rate that is truly affordable to the agency, the taxpayer and, ultimately, the homeowner.

The Land Development Agency should be set up to ensure that it is able to purchase State land at the most affordable rate possible. Doing that would mean giving people my age and those caught in the rip-off rental trap a realistic prospect of owning their own home.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I am deeply concerned about certain aspects of the Minister's proposed LDA. We are told that it will help tackle the housing crisis but at what cost and who stands to benefit? Similar arguments were once made about the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA. The LDA has disconcerting shades of NAMA, which is a State-sponsored body with a commercial remit offering great benefits to industry participants but large costs for those with housing needs. That sounds like NAMA. There is low transparency as key aspects are not subject to freedom of information, FOI, or the Regulation of Lobbying Act as it shrouds its actions behind a supposed need to get the best deal for the taxpayer. Again, that sounds like NAMA. It is inflationary in terms of house prices due to the requirement for the LDA to buy land from public bodies at full market value even if it has a lower existing use value. If we swap the words "public bodies" for "private developers", that sounds like NAMA. The likelihood of conflict of interests arising because the absence of a cooling-off period will allow a revolving door permitting LDA employees to gain valuable insider knowledge which can be leveraged if they move to industry. Again, that sounds like NAMA.

If people are beginning to develop a sense of *déjà vu*, we can hardly blame them. It is often said that past performance is not always a perfect guide to future performance, but it seems clear to me that this is likely to be a case of history repeating itself, first as a tragedy and then as a farce. I am also deeply concerned about the removal of powers from local councillors once again. We know that local councillors play a crucial part in and understand areas and their needs. Why take those powers from them?

Average homes in Galway city today cost €317,000, an 8.6% year-on-year increase, making Galway the second most expensive county in the country. People are crying out for affordable homes across Galway city. For many, the concept of owning their own home is merely a dream, but there is a good way and a bad way of doing that. Sinn Féin has outlined a clear policy on how to deliver those homes without lumping massive amounts of public money into another State agency that is unaccountable.

The LDA is developing the 4.5 acre Dyke Road site in Galway which will be transformed into mixed use development with a strong residential element. Housing is needed, and welcome, in Galway. We have been told that this housing will be largely affordable in nature, but if we look at what the LDA defines as affordable, it is housing below the prevailing market price. I hardly need point out to the Minister that the current average of €317,000, which is unaffordable for most people, would technically be below market value next year if the current inflationary trend continues, and it is set to continue, especially given the shared equity scheme. It seems that when it comes to house prices for developers and banks, the boom times are getting "boomier". That is quite an achievement on the part of this Government.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I am sharing time with Deputies Canney and Tóibín.

I thank the Minister of State for coming into the Chamber to bring the Land Development Agency Bill before us. We can all argue on the finer points but in general terms the direction of travel with this Bill is reasonable because it will most likely involve an acceleration of the roll-out of housing across the country. Everybody in this Chamber agrees that we need houses for the next generation. There are massive housing pressures and this Bill is at least part of the solution.

In his column in *The Irish Times* at the weekend, David McWilliams put it best when he said that housing is such an important issue, it was the issue in the last five general elections and it is likely to be the issue - the dominant factor - in the next general election. There is a reason for that. For all the disruption they cause, pandemics come and go, but this housing crisis will persist unless we do something about it. The Bill before us today is an attempt and has a strong possibility of at least addressing some of the core issues, because if a person has no home, he or she has no hope. It is a precondition to progress, both professionally and personally.

I have points to make on the legislation. The first relates to putting the Land Development Agency on a statutory footing. Whatever people's views are on the operations of the Land Development Agency most reasonable people would agree it is a good idea for the State to have a land development agency. It is a good idea to have a register that is established and maintained by an agency that has a strategic and long-term view of the way we use our public land because, let us face it, our people are our most important resource but our land comes second. It is very important that we maximise that utility and leverage that asset for what it is. I very much welcome that the Land Development Agency will be put on a statutory footing. I appreciate it already exists but this gives it a much stronger basis because it is included in primary legislation. To be honest, I am surprised it has not happened yet. Having land registry is very important because it provides proper information and visibility for decision-makers in respect of the existing land banks. If there is poor information, one will make poor decisions regardless of how good a decision-maker one is.

The second point relates to transparency and accountability. As this will be a powerful agency it is important that the appropriate safeguards, checks and balances are in place. As a general rule this legislation has got it right in that it achieves that balance. First, the agency is under media scrutiny. It is subject to FOI, which is welcome. It is subject to very intrusive audits by the Comptroller and Auditor General. From a parliamentary supervision point of view it is subject to reporting to the Committee of Public Accounts and any committee in the Oireachtas. Through Leaders' Questions and other forums it is subject to scrutiny from the entire Dáil in plenary session, if necessary. From an accountability and transparency point of view, therefore, the structures in place are good safeguards.

This may be a minor point but I was on the website last night researching this contribution and the sites the Land Development Agency is currently working on are clearly laid out. There is nothing to hide in that regard. There is ample transparency. The checks, balances and safeguards in this legislation are a positive feature.

The third point relates to the funding stream. It is also welcome that €1.25 billion from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund is being used to develop housing. We know that housing is holding back our economy, our society and our people. I cannot think of a better investment from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund than housing so I welcome the fact that €1.25 bil-

lion is being ring-fenced for that. It is also welcome that the Land Development Agency will have the option basically to erase debt, with the approval of the Minister.

It may be deliberate but there is no mention of the European Investment Bank in Luxembourg. The Minister of State might comment on that in his closing remarks or subsequently in correspondence from his office. Is it envisaged that the Land Development Agency could tap into the extra funding resources from the European Investment Bank to expedite and accelerate the building of homes in this country? I would also welcome that if it could be done.

As a general rule, I am against compulsory purchase orders but I recognise their utility in very limited circumstances, particularly in urban settings. Most people in the Chamber are aware there is land hoarding, with prime sites that could be used for housing in potentially lucrative or select sites across cities in the country being hoarded. Compulsory purchase orders are at least an option for the Land Development Agency to use if it is deemed necessary. I am reassured to see that at least this is not regarded as a first option, which will always be voluntary agreement. Compulsory purchase orders will be used only as a last resort. I am also reassured to see the Land Development Agency will require a court order before a compulsory purchase order can be enacted. The balance is right in that respect.

The next point I raise is very important and it concerns the collaborative structures. The Land Development Agency will set up collaborative structures with local authorities, Government agencies and Departments, which is really important. The local authorities have been very successful across the country, particularly in my constituency in Kildare, as well as in Laois and Offaly in rolling out social housing in the past couple of years. I would like to see local authorities remaining in the driving seat. Any support from the Land Development Agency should not amount to an executive function. The local authorities should be maintained in the driving seat if at all possible.

These are the five points I wanted to make about the legislation but I have some other points on the Land Development Agency itself. The first may be close to the heart of the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, as it relates to two sites currently being developed by the Land Development Agency. One is in Naas and one is in Mullingar, and both those sites are former military barracks. I have a bit of a history lesson. In 1998, the military was basically evicted from Devoy Barracks in Naas. It was thrown out with six weeks of notice. Hundreds of troops were accommodated at the barracks, as well as the Army apprentice school. The Army is still reeling from the loss of that school and all the accommodation lost in Naas. Similarly, in 2012, when Columb Barracks was closed, again with very short notice, all the troops moved to Athlone. Many military personnel and their families lost accommodation in the barracks.

My preference is that both of those sites be used for military purposes but I recognise the reality that they are currently slated for accommodation and social housing. In light of the specific history associated with the sites and with military housing and accommodation being such an emotive concern, what are the Minister's thoughts about giving the housing units on the sites to military families on the social housing list on a preferential basis? It would go some way to assuaging the anger still being felt in the military community because of how they were treated over 20 years with regard to the Devoy Barracks and Columb Barracks.

My final concern relates to military accommodation and housing in general all across the country and particularly in the Curragh Camp in my constituency. The Curragh is a lovely place full of lovely people but it is the most derelict town in the country. It is a town and there

are two primary schools and a secondary school there but the camp is falling down. It really needs proper investment. I would be grateful for the Minister of State's thoughts on how he sees the Land Development Agency entering into a service level agreement or a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Defence so the agency could provide additional funding through the Department or on its own to provide military housing for military families within the military perimeter of installations. Baldonnell airbase and the Curragh Camp are cases in point.

It is really important to provide military housing and this practice is repeated across the European Union. If soldiers and their families are accommodated on base and an emergency kicks off, troops would be on location and would not have to get into their car to drive 100 km before they can get to their colleagues. These are all the points I wanted to raise and I thank the Minister of State for his time. If we get some clarification on how the military housing matter could play out, we can take it from there.

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Land Development Agency Bill. I have concerns about it, none more than my belief that the agency will become a provider of houses in the cities and suburban areas but it will not do much for constituencies like Galway East. I also have reservations about taking power from councillors, which is anti-democratic, so we must consider its impact.

When I speak about my constituency and housing, my first argument is that the private housing market is dysfunctional because developers cannot build houses at a price where they are affordable for the people who need to buy them. Most people who tried to build houses in my constituency are looking for the local authorities to buy the entire scheme, as it is the only way they can get it sold on. The underlying reasons must be examined.

In Athenry we have a significant number of housing estates without proper sewerage systems. In 2019, a former Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, opened an extension to the waste water treatment plant. The idea was that a piped network would be put in place immediately so that all the town could be serviced. I was told during the week by Irish Water that this will not happen until 2024, which would be five years later. There are sewage treatment plants in estates, which were built on a temporary basis and that were to last for five years. They have been there for 12 years and will be there for 17 years. It is an environmental time bomb that will go off.

I also raise the difficulties being experienced in Craughwell, Corofin and Abbeyknockmoy, which applied to the Department for funding under the developer-provided infrastructure scheme. The applications were refused on the basis of a further review being required. In Athenry funding was provided to connect two housing estates to a sewerage scheme but after it was discovered the pipework does not exist, the money must go back to the Department.

In any town or village in my constituency it is not possible to get planning permission for a scheme with a private waste water treatment plant. It is impossible to get planning permission within these villages or towns for houses with septic tanks. Such applications have been refused by Galway County Council and An Bord Pleanála. There is also a move to disallow people from building in rural areas, meaning the only place people can build in Galway now is in the city, Oranmore and a few other places that have the benefit of a municipal treatment plant. This is what is causing problems so it is time for us to examine such matters. People are coming to me from an estate in Athenry to tell me the sewerage systems are not working and

the tanks are full. The houses are adjacent to the Clarin river so when we see fish lying on their backs dead, we will have a big environmental concern. The same could happen with the River Clare outside Corofin. We will then be wondering what happened.

I know Irish Water is concentrating efforts on the main centres and the Land Development Agency will do the same. We must have a reality check and look at the cost of building a house, including from where we see additional costs. There are planning and development fees and levies. There are utility connection charges, which are extraordinary. There are building and environmental regulations, among others, and these are good in that they mean good quality properties are built. They are nonetheless adding huge cost to the construction. There are heating and airtightness guidelines and then there is the large tax take by the Government from the construction sector.

The Land Development Agency may do something in some parts of the country but it will not solve the problem. This debate should be a wake-up call and we must consider how to get the private housing market back on its feet. I am not trying to pander to developers. Although people complain about them, developers are currently not building private houses because there is nobody to buy them. We cannot rely on the State to provide them all. I am asking for this to be looked at in a proper, coherent fashion, so that we can start to deliver housing in a proper way.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I want to raise a specific issue. It relates to something the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage said in recent days. His statement in respect of homeless deaths in this State was tone-deaf. It was an incredible statement for the Minister to make from a political perspective. It was also an incredibly cold reaction to the sad fact that 79 people died in homelessness, in Dublin alone, in 2020. The Minister of State can correct me if I am wrong, but it appeared that the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, tried to undermine the seriousness of this shocking figure by suggesting that some of these people may have died in traffic accidents while they were homeless, and as a result, were included in these figures. It seems that the Minister was doing something that his predecessor sought to do by trying to change the statistics, rather than rectifying the situation affecting people on the ground.

The fact that the report the Minister sought only came after we, in Aontú, raised this issue in Leinster House is also shocking. It is also shocking that the Minister in charge was not blown out of the water when looking at those figures and the increase in the figures over the last while. There was no human reaction on the part of the Minister when he noticed that the figures for 2020 had skyrocketed by July. By July 2020, the number of people who had died in homelessness was already higher than in the previous two years. That this did not motivate the Minister to decide to hold an investigation into what was happening is also amazing.

I became extremely concerned about the high numbers of deaths among homeless people back in July. I requested a breakdown from the Dublin Region Homeless Executive. The breakdown showed that the peak of the death rate coincided, believe it or not, with the Dáil voting on whether or not to give Ministers of State a pay rise. I think the Minister of State will accept that there is something deeply tragic about the fact that 79 homeless people died in Dublin in 2020, and the peak occurred while the political establishment in here was lining its own pockets.

The deaths of these people were not caused by traffic accidents. If the Minister responsible is in denial mode, it is very hard to see how we can really get to the kernel of the problem. I

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will provide examples of some of the people who died. A young woman in her 30s appeared to have tragically taken her own life. Another woman, aged just 19, died in emergency accommodation managed by a private operator. A young man in his 20s was found dead while sleeping rough, having been released from prison the day before. A man in his 30s also appeared to have tragically taken his own life. These are no road traffic accidents. These are homeless deaths. Those who died are real people, not statistics to be moved around on a sheet in the hope that it will reflect better on this Government.

I repeatedly raised the practice of the local authority in Dublin of refusing assistance to people who are not natives of Dublin, while at the same time, NPHET was advising these people not to leave Dublin because of Covid-19. The Minister pleaded ignorance on this issue right up until “RTE Investigates” exposed the situation. The Minister of State can argue about the figures for 2020 and what happened to those people, but the sad fact of the matter is that the 2020 figures are radically higher than those for 2018 and 2019.

I want to raise my voice in concern at the Government practice of selling off or giving away public land to private developers on which to build houses. Why is it happening? Why can the State not build houses on those blocks of land, or at least commission the housing agencies to operate in this sector? It is not because of a lack of skilled workers. It is the same pool of skilled workers that is used to build private and public housing. Is it because of funding? The truth of the matter is that this Government has not exhausted the European Investment Bank funding for social housing. Housing is the ideal investment for the European Investment Bank because it pays back over the years.

When I submitted a series of questions to my local authority, I found that during the summer 130 council-owned properties in Meath were vacant. At the same time, 1,168 people had applied for homes, but only 440 of them got homes. How can 700 people on a local authority housing list be turned away at a time when there are 130 vacant homes in that area?

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I thank the Minister of State for bringing this Bill to the House. The Bill has gravely concerned me over the past year, considering its potential negative outcomes for society. However, I also welcome its potential to assist in the mitigation of our housing crisis. The two points on which I wish to speak are public housing and public land, and the removal of councillors’ voting rights.

I must begin by stating that we are in a housing crisis. Therefore, it is without doubt that the primary remit of the LDA should be to provide public housing on public land. It is on the record of the Dáil that I have previously contested that the State must not be complicit in profit-driven housing models. Its objective must be to lower rental costs and make homes affordable to those who are currently locked out of the property market, paying exorbitant rents or living at home.

Coupled with this legislation is the Affordable Housing Bill 2020, which provides the mechanisms to pursue the creation of sustainable communities through cost-rental, social and affordable purchase homes on public land. Earlier this week, I asked a question at the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I asked how many cost-rental homes we should be building every year to lower rents. The Housing Agency replied that the number should be in the order of 2,000 annually, and both NESC and the ESRI said that multiples of this number would be required. This is the solution put to us by our national experts in relation to lowering rent costs. I wholeheartedly agree with them.

At a recent briefing, the LDA projected that it will build in the region of 2,000 units a year over the next six years. That being the case, I urge the Minister of State and the Department to heed the direction of our national experts to deliver 100% LDA public housing through cost-rental, social and affordable homes. This will show the country that we are serious about providing affordable homes in this crisis.

I am also concerned, to say the least, about the bypassing of local elected representatives through the removal of section 183 when it comes to LDA development. We lost our town councils in 2014, and now another strike is being made against local democracy. I will find this action very hard to vote for. As a councillor, I can recall how much power is concentrated in central government. The Green Party has always advocated that this power should be distributed to give local government autonomy through its local representatives, who are best placed to communicate local knowledge and the complexities of their communities. I will pursue this issue because it is most concerning to me.

I would like to believe that the LDA, local authorities and councillors can negotiate on this issue and come to agreement to build public housing on public land. I would also like to note that the LDA is currently operational in the Central Mental Hospital site in Dundrum, where there is growing frustration about its approach to community groups. It is felt that the LDA is treating the public consultation phase as a box-ticking exercise, and groups would appreciate more meaningful engagement and collaboration.

To recap, the Green Party welcomes this Bill to tackle our housing crisis. The Minister's proposal of 100% public housing on public land in Dublin, however, calls for the retention of local democracy and councillors' voting rights.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: It is an ambition of many people in my area to own their own homes. It is a reasonable and decent ambition. However, it is increasingly difficult for those on ordinary incomes - engineers, teachers, nurses or those who occupy similar roles - to realise that ambition. Not only is it difficult to get a deposit together when renting, but the prices are moving further and further out of reach.

People want to live and work locally in their own communities. They do not want to have to move some distance away to be able to afford a home. I am glad that a Fianna Fáil Minister is taking steps to deal with this issue and give people a chance to own their own home. The Bill takes a three-pronged approach to housing provision, encompassing cost-rental accommodation, where people can rent at more affordable rates, affordable housing, where people can own their house outright, and shared equity, where the State takes an interest in the house. While it is the smallest portion of the overall plan, I want to highlight the shared equity aspect because it is giving people throughout the country a chance to buy their own home. It is important that people should be able to use the scheme to build their own home or, if necessary, to buy an existing house. As I said, the Bill is also focused on the provision of cost-rental accommodation and affordable houses.

Initially, these provisions will be directed towards the larger populations, where there is the greatest demand. However, I hope that will not be done at the expense of people in the rest of the population being excluded. As I said, people want to be able to live and work locally in their own community and not have to move long distances for an affordable home. It is hugely important that the schemes extend beyond those larger settlements as quickly as possible in order that the widest range of people across the country can access them.

Welcome features of the Bill include the proposals for enhanced Oireachtas committee accountability and the freedom of information aspects. Those are very welcome arrangements in respect of the LDA. The affordability provisions are also welcome, as is making sure that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. There needs to be flexibility in that regard because affordability in Dublin, for example, is very different from affordability in County Cork or any other part of the country. I also welcome the Part V social housing requirements that will apply to the schemes. While much of the focus is on the first-time buyer, it is welcome that the Minister is looking beyond that and that a limited number of other groups, such as separated or divorced people, will also be able to access the schemes. That is very positive.

Teastaíonn ó dhaoine le bheith ábalta tithíocht a fháil ina gceantar féin, i measc a bpobal agus teacht uirthi ar phraghas réasúnta. Is dúshlán mór é do dhaoine nach féidir leo an deposit a chur le chéile agus toisc go bhfuil sé fiordheacair de bharr na praghsanna ag ardú. Is maith an rud é go bhfuil an Rialtas agus Aire de Fhianna Fáil ag dul i ngleic leis seo agus ag leagan amach plean chuige sin. Fáiltím roimh sin.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I have huge problems with this Bill and it should be rejected. If media commentary is to be believed, many Fianna Fáil Members also have concerns about it. I urge them, too, to reject it. The provisions regarding the LDA and the designated activity companies, as outlined in the Bill, are a bad idea. The professed objective of the LDA is to drive strategic land assets and use public lands to build affordable homes. My fear is that the enactment of this Bill will have the opposite effect when it comes to constructing affordable homes. The aim may have been to address the delivery gap regarding the provision of affordable homes but the outcome will be the privatisation and giveaway of desperately needed public land. That land has never been needed more than it is now to address the housing crisis we are facing.

Some of the proposals in the Bill are quite extraordinary and will serve to undermine local democracy. Fianna Fáil and the developers really cannot help themselves. It is outrageous that the powers of councillors can be bypassed when it comes to the sale of local authority sites to the LDA. At a time when the pending election of a directly elected mayor in Limerick is trumpeted as something that will close the democratic deficit, we are creating a deficit by enacting this Bill. Powers are to be stripped from the people who know the particulars of local areas. That is wrong. Instead, local authorities should be properly funded in order that they can build quality affordable houses. Councillors are voted in by the people and many of us in this House have served time on local authorities. I ask colleagues to imagine elected councillors being told that they have no say when they suspect that public lands that are being sold will not be used to best serve the public interest.

The LDA is not equipped to deal with regional housing systems. Public land should not be used for the construction of market-price homes. The agency will pay market prices for the land purchased, which will drive up the prices of homes. That is obvious. The definition of “affordable” contained in the Bill is meaningless. A price that is a euro less than the median house price will be considered affordable. It is just not realistic. For somebody on a lower income, the stars will really have to align for them to be able to avail of one of these not so affordable homes. None of this is great news for those seeking housing but it is a wonderful opportunity for developers and equity investors to make major profits off public land.

I am sure colleagues will recall the recent campaign by residents in Moyross to ensure a critical regeneration project, the Coonagh-Knockalisheen distributor road, will be built in full.

As part of that campaign, residents met virtually with the Minister for Transport on 22 January. During what has been described to me as a disastrous meeting, the Minister discussed conversations he had with the LDA regarding what was best for Moyross. This was a new and concerning development as it was not something previously mentioned to the community or any local representatives. The Build Our Road campaign has said that the LDA has since confirmed that it did not consider plans regarding the community in Moyross. I am curious to know what discussions were held between the Minister for Transport and the LDA in regard to the Coonagh-Knockalisheen project and I have submitted a freedom of information request in that regard.

If we want to fix the housing crisis, we need to build local authority homes like the one in which I grew up. If we want to provide homes that are genuinely affordable, this Bill should be rejected. If we want to maintain democracy at local level, the Bill should be rejected. This is too important and radical a change to be passed without scrutiny. The fact that the Minister did not send the revised Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny leaves us wondering whether he wants to get it right or just get it done.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Four speakers from the Rural Independent Group are sharing time and Deputy Mattie McGrath is the first of them.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak in this debate. When the Bill was first introduced, I thought it might be a good idea. However, having looked at the proposals in it, I think it will be a disaster. As previous speakers said, it will suit the developers. A huge hoarding of land has gone on since the last housing crisis and economic bust and that is all there.

I want to speak about Tipperary. We have lost everything in Tipperary. We have lost all our town councils, including the members who served there, some of them on a voluntary basis. All they got was their costs. Those councils were a huge asset to all the towns that had them. We in south Tipperary were amalgamated with north Tipperary. In fact, it was a takeover, as I call it, not an amalgamation, and south Tipperary was left devastated and plundered. We kept Cromwell out of Clonmel but we could not keep the people from north Tipperary from coming down and taking away our roads, services, planning and everything else. They took the whole lot to Nenagh. I have nothing at all against the people or town of Nenagh but what happened was totally unfair. Where the borough council previously had a budget of €15.1 million for the town of Clonmel - one of the finest boroughs in the country - we now have a pittance of maybe a couple of hundred thousand euro, if we are lucky. We are left fighting for the crumbs to maintain the town's infrastructure. It is nothing.

Getting back to land, Tipperary County Council has land that is abandoned in every town and village in the county. People were prosecuted in the past for having land with buachaláin or thistles on it, and so they should have been. Even the motorways are destroyed, with the land adjacent to them and the slopes alongside them being left to go quite wild. The council has land everywhere in Tipperary, in every town, including Carrick-on-Suir, Kilsheelan, Clonmel and Ardfinnan. Tipperary town has nearly a good-sized farm with the land that is there. All of that land could be built on by local authorities. We do not want another agency, because agencies become quangos. We know some of the famous names who did not know whether they wanted to go for mayor of Limerick or to be head of the LDA or whatever else. We do not need another agency to take away more powers from the elected councillors. We also have the 2040 plan, which is devastating rural land, and the many other new agencies that were put in to deal with people when they are trying to draw up their county development plans. We have agency after

agency and most of them are useless, toothless and fruitless because they do not do what they were set up to do and instead become self-serving.

We must let the county councils build the houses, as they did in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, when they had no equipment and no big machinery. I do not know what is wrong now that we have to get so many reports up to Departments, where they stay for six months before going back to the county council and then back to the Department again. It is a merry-go-round of pushing paper and nothing being built when we have a steep housing crisis. We do not need a land agency and I will not be supporting this Bill. I do not know what my colleagues in the Rural Independent Group intend to do but I certainly will not be supporting it. It is enabling another quango.

Mention was made of CPO provisions. A CPO is certainly necessary and useful for some road developments and other very necessary projects. However, as I said, we do not want to give too much power to this quango and take away more powers from the county councils. The elected members of those councils are the eyes and ears of the public. I wish the new Ministers well but I am not supporting the development of this agency. We need to empower the councils again and give them funding. We need to give more funding to the better ones that spend the money because some are very lethargic in spending it. We need to build council houses. There are waiting lists everywhere.

Another issue is that a Part V project can be abused. One was abused in Nenagh, where 60, 70 or 80 acres were available. A number of houses have been built on the one little green area in a housing estate and the matter is now in the courts. It should not be happening. People in estates want to keep their green areas. One would not mind if there was no more land available but there are 70 acres available on the outskirts of the town serviced by roads and everything else.

We need a means to empower local authorities to build infrastructure and have sewerage capacity in all villages and towns. One can talk about zoned land and everything else but if there is no sewerage system, one cannot build teach amháin. One cannot build any house. Eighty percent of the villages in my county are without proper sewerage and storm water infrastructure. This must be addressed. Some of the schemes were developer led and they worked out fine, and some did not because the planners did not enforce the planning conditions. There is a lot of blame that can be cast on many people but I do not believe the panacea and cure are a land development agency with a CEO and a plethora of trappings. The first thing it would have would be a big office with a plaque on the wall. There would be quite expensive furniture. The Government should stick with and support the people who want to build the houses. If people want to build houses themselves in the country, they should be allowed to do so.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá áthas orm deis a fháil labhairt ar an mBille seo agus ar na fadhbanna a bhaineann leis a chur in iúl. Whether this Bill turns out to be significant in the good or bad sense is one thing but it is clear that the powers it will confer on the LDA are enormous: the regulation of relevant public land to develop and regenerate the delivery of housing and to develop and manage housing on that and other land; to enable the agency to provide services to local authorities in order to assist in the performance of their functions relating to housing; to provide for the acquisition by the agency of relevant public land, including by means of granting it first refusal on a proposed sale; and to provide for the compulsory purchase of the land by the agency. Each of these provisions on its own could easily absorb an entire day's debate in this Chamber. The constitutional issues with respect to the compulsory purchase order, CPO,

alone will raise significant concerns, especially in rural Ireland. I raised these concerns last April when the previous Government's proposal on CPOs for agricultural land became clear. I said at that time that if it were implemented, it would certainly undermine and endanger any efforts to maintain financial viability through farm expansion, and I also called it a land grab. These concerns were amplified by reports that the CPO proposal would seek to implement key recommendation from the Kenny report of 1973, which states, "It should be possible for local authorities or government agencies to 'CPO' farmland for house building, by paying the landowner agricultural value plus a 25% 'top-up'." However, it is disingenuous to make the claim that farmland is property like any other and that it must be subjected to the restriction of constitutional property rights that are currently allowed in law. This is to ignore totally the plain reality that farms and farmland are, in the vast majority of cases, also homes, which enjoy additional constitutional protections. The Minister may recall the suggestion in this regard by the Master of the High Court, Mr. Justice Edmund Honohan, in 2016. He recommended that the State use of CPOs to buy back residential properties that were sold to vulture funds. At the time, Mr. Justice Honohan pointed out that legislation could be introduced so the properties could be purchased for the same price for which they were sold. I do not recall any legislative rush to limit the rights of vulture funds equivalent to that which now pertains to farmland. The rights — indeed, the birth rights — that farmers enjoy to maintain control of their land must not become collateral damage in the race towards this Government's creation of a new land agency.

I will not be supporting the Bill because I have serious concerns. Local authorities should be given many more powers and funds because they are doing great work.

There is also the issue of one-off rural housing. What powers will the LDA have with respect to this matter? Rural housing is a major issue. The Government and its predecessor talked about depopulation in rural communities. Is it any wonder that there is depopulation when people cannot build houses on their own land? This must be addressed by the Government. Rural Ireland is suffering ongoing discrimination and it is being impacted negatively. People should have the absolute right to build a house on their own land and remain within their own community and parish. I hope the Government will have the goodwill to try to resolve this ongoing matter, which is causing great distress among rural families.

As far back as June 2019, I was calling on the then Minister responsible for housing, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, to provide an immediate timeline for the publication of the new rural planning guidelines. We are aware that a working group was established to review and, where necessary, recommend changes to the 2005 planning guidelines on sustainable rural housing. I hope these guidelines will be published and that they will be fair to rural families who are being discriminated against in terms of one-off housing.

Deputy Michael Collins: Like the previous two speakers, I will not be supporting this Bill to set up a land development agency. It is democracy kicking democracy in the teeth. The past two Governments have been doing this. The current Government is continuing to take basic rights away from local councillors. Rights were taken from the town councillors. Former Minister Phil Hogan stood over their demise. It has turned out to be a disaster. Even though it was meant to be turned around under different programmes for Government, this never happened.

The general focus is on Dublin but the Government needs to focus again on housing. We have a housing crisis. My constituency, Cork South-West, has simply been abandoned in respect of social housing. Places such as Bandon, Kinsale, Skibbereen and Bantry are affected. People ring me in my office every day of the week pleading with me to address this. Many of

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them are very genuine and would love not to be looking for social housing; they would love to be able to consider a serviced site, perhaps. Such sites have proven to be successful in certain areas.

The agency is going to be set up no matter what happens and the Government will railroad it through. Is it going to focus on serviced sites? I saw them in places such as Schull, where many young families set up. It is good for the communities and schools in the locality. Unfortunately, an awful lot of people need the banks and certain Government agencies to work with them. They may not need a social house. An affordable site would be a great start for some if the banks worked with them. They would build their own houses.

A major issue arises regarding planning permission. Down my way, young people looking for planning permission face massive hurdles. They are trying to get a start in life but hurdles are put in front of them. These hurdles are very unfair, such as the one requiring residency in a place for seven years. I am not referring to environmental considerations, which are important, but to nonsensical rubbish put in front of people just to block them.

When an authority does grant permission, it gets a massive contribution for the local roadway. Despite paying planning fees, residents come back to me and tell me their local road is in an appalling state with potholes and that not a brown cent has been spent on it. Funding has dried up for the local improvement scheme. My brother is a councillor in west Cork and he is absolutely worn out, as am I, from filling out local improvement scheme forms so a little funding might be made available so people can do up the roads to their homes and other buildings, including in Goleen, Skibbereen and Castletownbere. They are refused because the funding has dried up. The same applies to the community involvement scheme.

We must give more powers and funds to councils to take over ordinary housing estates. This has been done successfully in many places in west Cork but now funds have dried up. The people of College Grove estate in Clonakilty contacted me recently.

5 o'clock

They have been trying hard for so long to get their estate taken over by the council but they have been refused. The excuse is always given that there is no money in the pot. That is the unfortunate situation in Clonakilty. There are also issues with Irish Water and major development issues in west Cork. People want areas like Kealkill, Goleen, Ballinspittle and Ballydehob to expand but sewerage systems have to be developed.

I will refer to one fabulous development in Enniskean that would be a game-changer for people of the Ballineen-Enniskean area and which has the support of GP Wood, the Carbery Group, the Ballineen-Enniskean Association and St. Mary's GAA Club. These organisations want to grow and develop their community. The Carbery Group and GP Wood give employment to hundreds of people but their workers cannot get a house or build in the locality. There is a fabulous development ready to go but it cannot start because there is an issue with the sewerage system. It is the same in Ballinspittle, Goleen, Ballydehob and anywhere one speaks about. Another 14 houses that were meant to be built in Kealkill cannot go ahead because of a sewerage issue. It is time to wake up. We have outdated systems and the Government wants to take power from local councils, which will make things worse. The county development plans need to be reviewed. In County Cork, in certain areas where 20 or 30 houses are allowed, people have been unable to get planning for the past five or ten years.

Setting up another agency is wrong. I do not agree with it and I will vote against it. The powers need to be with the local politicians, the councillors who were elected on the ground, and I will continue to support them.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I have been a building contractor all my life. When the Land Development Agency, LDA, was launched in 2018, it was to have two functions, namely, to manage State lands strategically to ensure they were being put to the best use, and to deliver 150,000 homes over 20 years. Those are the functions the agency should have managed.

As I said, I have been in construction all my life. I have been a local councillor in the Adare-Rathkeale district. We also have the Kilmallock and Newcastle West districts in our rural area. If the LDA gets this through, it will destroy rural areas because the LDA will not look at areas that have poor infrastructure.

I spoke recently about a housing estate being built in Hospital, County Limerick. While 15 of the houses were able to connect to the local sewerage system, the other six had to connect to a private sewerage system. What we will see is that the LDA will look at areas that have sewerage infrastructure. The last agency that was set up was Irish Water and we can see what happened with that. It was an absolute disaster. When the council was looking after the water system, there were no issues. One might as well try to get through to the President as try to get through to Irish Water to get anything done. Water infrastructure was in big trouble. The LDA, if it takes over, will forget about rural areas. The 2040 plan being introduced will stop houses being built in rural areas. I was born, grew up and have raised my family in a rural area. I and my family, friends and relatives and anyone in the community should be allowed to build in our own area.

Is somebody talking in the background? I can hear feedback.

An Ceann Comhairle: I cannot hear it here.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I can hear it up here.

If the LDA has the right structure, it will cover rural areas where there are currently poor water and sewerage services because they are at capacity. Oolagh has no capacity and people cannot build a house in the area. People in Askeaton have been waiting 30 years for a sewerage system. How many Governments have promised this in the past 30 years? Raw sewage is being pumped into the Shannon Estuary. This is what we are up against.

On the other hand, if this role is given to local authorities, it gets buried in paperwork and everything goes around in circles. The Bill is not right. It must cover all areas and show where the investment will be in rural areas, towns and villages to make them sustainable. We are entitled to infrastructure as much as people in cities are. Towns and villages could become self-sustainable if the proper infrastructure were put in but the LDA will not do that. It will only go where there is existing infrastructure and it will forget about other rural areas.

Everyone is entitled to their culture. Everyone is entitled to live within their culture. We have had that right for generations. People, whether they grow up in a farmhouse, cottage or any part of a rural area, village or town, should have the right to come home and the infrastructure should be put in place by the Government. Unless there are guarantees that this Bill will provide equally across the board for all areas, towns and villages, I cannot support it because the same will happen as happened with Irish Water. Infrastructure is being pushed into the cit-

ies. The Government wants water to run to Dublin. Why not pay Limerick for it? We have no problem with that but the Government will have invest in our infrastructure if it wants our water. It is the same with land development. If the Government wants this Bill to pass, why not invest in rural areas and bring all counties with it, regardless of whether they are in an urban or a rural area? That is what I am looking for and for that reason, I will not be able to support the Bill.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State for attending to discuss the Land Development Agency Bill. The Bill is a proactive attempt to tackle the housing crisis we face in this country. It is clear that we need to build more houses and that increasing the supply of houses in the market in an affordable manner is the optimal approach to dealing with the housing crisis. The Land Development Agency Bill represents an opportunity to undertake strategic land assembly and fully utilise State lands to build affordable homes and sustainable communities in line with the best environmental practices. In general, the proactive approach to dealing with the housing crisis is welcomed. However, we must ensure that this agency will be the most efficient use of public money, both in terms of utilising local authority networks currently in place and prevention of potential misuse of funding. We must not repeat the mistakes of the past.

Yesterday, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, reported that greater increases in incentives for people to buy will most likely increase the price of housing due to the low level of supply in the country. It is imperative, therefore, that we pursue mechanisms to increase supply but not at any cost. We must learn the lessons of the past. Growing up in Ireland, I remember seeing ghost estates across the country, places with no amenities, transport infrastructure or green spaces. Often, housing developments were left incomplete. We must ensure we do not end up with ghost estates again. Strategic planning is required to ensure that any development will have the necessary public infrastructure in place. We want to provide people with homes and communities, not just houses with no life or purpose. We cannot allow circumstances to arise again where communities suffer from social deprivation, there is little opportunity to succeed or get on in life and people get stuck in a downward spiral. Mixed tenure housing, where there is a range of different cost types of housing available, is the best way to ensure we create an inclusive and tolerant community.

I welcome the change to the affordability clause. The Bill will provide that, where public lands in urban centres of over 10,000 persons are being developed for housing, there will be a requirement to use a portion of land to provide a minimum level of affordable housing. This affordability delivery requirement will also be taken into account when valuing land for sale to the LDA, thereby reducing the cost of the land and allowing for cheaper homes. The Bill reflects a base of 50% in terms of the affordability requirements, increasing from the 30% set by the previous Government and taking into account the programme for Government's commitment to affordable housing and the ability to vary up and down based on housing needs.

We need to take the issue of affordable housing seriously and I hope this legislation will be a proactive step in the right direction.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank Deputy O'Connor for being so generous with the time shared. I am not sure if Deputy O'Donoghue is still in the Chamber but I was taken by his remarks on water going from the Shannon region to the Dublin region. I am sure he will look for a similar level of gratitude for local property tax going from my home area to regions across the country. We have balance in this country and it is extremely important to acknowledge that.

It is extremely important to acknowledge the balance provided in this legislation, which I welcome and, of course, support. I am grateful to the Minister of State for bringing it to the House and for the opportunity to raise a few points.

The key issue that has faced all of us over the last number of years is the ability to deliver affordable public homes for people who need them, and to deliver them now. If we look at the history of development in this State, we can obviously learn lessons. We can see what can be achieved when it is driven. I fundamentally believe the ability to deliver those affordable new homes that are so badly needed across every part of our beautiful country is at the heart of this legislation.

What is really crucial in this legislation, when it revamps and looks again at the agency, is that we look at what it has done so far. We should look at the opportunities and learn from the processes in place. In the heart of my constituency in Dundrum, the former Central Mental Hospital site is being developed by the Land Development Agency to provide up to 1,300 much-needed homes for that community. That process is under way. It is definitely at the pre-consultation stage. It is really crucial with any proposal to develop an area of a townland, that real and proper engagement is started, and not just engagement for engagement's sake. I am grateful to the project leads in Dundrum for being so open with me and other elected representatives in the area, be they councillors, Deputies or Senators, when they are in the area. The community that is there already needs to be at the heart of it.

I simply do not go in for a NIMBYism. If we want homes, we have to build them somewhere. However, the best way to deliver homes - family homes, real homes - is, of course, with the buy-in of the local community. The processes available to the Land Development Agency need to be strengthened. I mention the ability for a community not just to feed into seminars or webinars, which they are doing at the moment, or to have their voices heard but what they say needs to be replicated and responded to in the plans when they come out.

We have a crucial development in Dundrum to provide high-density, good quality affordable homes. It is much needed and, as I said, the issue came up at every door during the general election more than a year ago. We must make sure, however, that those homes are fit for purpose and that common sense is applied when it comes to open space but also when it comes to community facilities. One thing we need to learn from other developments from, perhaps, a couple of decades ago is that one cannot simply build homes first and then think about the community requirements afterwards, that is, school places, childcare, recreational places and at harnessing the power and potential of existing nearby communities, whether local football clubs, schools and much else, to drive that new development and cohesive community spirit.

I ask the Minister of State to bring back to his Department and the teams at the Land Development Agency the idea that they need to be truly reactive to residents. I am sure that if they are, these new developments provided for under this legislation will be wholly beneficial to society, not just to those people who are lucky enough to get homes of any nature in this area and, crucially, those who will be living beside those homes and who will benefit from those additional community facilities. With that, I am delighted to support this legislation.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I have many concerns with this proposed Land Development Agency legislation, primarily the pushing of a misguided housing policy pursued by this and previous Governments. It is a policy based on private markets and housing developers being given the responsibility of solving the State's housing crisis. This is a continuation of a flawed assump-

tion that the interests of private developers driven by profit will ever align with the interests of working families who want and need an affordable home to live in with security and comfort, whether they are homeowners or renters. Indeed, for those currently paying excessive rents, those struggling to buy an affordable home and the thousands of homeless people, it is obvious that this and successive Government strategies are failing. Those they are failing most are those most in need. It is hard to imagine how during a housing crisis of this scale and a global pandemic, when we desperately need public, social and affordable housing, the Government will take the precious public land we own, which could be developed for a purpose that best suits those most in need, and sell it to private developers.

The fact local elected representatives do not need to give consent is not only an attack on democracy, but it is downright insulting to those who have been democratically elected to those positions. This is a mechanism of stripping local councillors of their right to have a say in respect of the best use for public land in their constituencies. However, it also removes from those local representatives the obligation to represent the views of local communities; the people they are there to give voice to.

In my constituency, a group that desperately needs a voice when it comes to the Land Development Agency is that involved in Columb Barracks, Mullingar and Connolly Barracks in County Longford. A group established with the purpose of identifying public land for development has some merit. Such an idea could allow us to identify land to get the maximum amount of use for resources while ensuring that we provide decent, comfortable and affordable homes for families. However, that is not what this is. This proposal is yet another attempt to let the market fix the problem with the real potential of it being the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, part two. Just like the shared equity scheme, the Land Development Agency will exasperate the housing crisis. Such schemes seem to be the calling card of this Government. Things will get worse for those most in need and better for the developers and the banks that finance them. Things will absolutely improve for the vested interests in this country and groups that hold sway over Fine Fáil, Fine Gael and now the Green Party.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move now to the Independent Group. Deputies Pringle and Fitzmaurice will contribute. I will have to ask whoever is in possession after 17 minutes to move the adjournment of the debate.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I only have ten minutes. For the record, we need to clarify what was said by a previous speaker about the property tax in Galway. When his party decided to bring in a property tax, €12 million was collected from the people and the equalisation fund was sent to Ms Angela Merkel. That was decided by a person he supports. On top of that, the water he drinks, the gas that keeps him warm and the electricity that keeps the lights on in Dublin all comes from rural Ireland. The sludge that comes out of the septic tanks and goes to treatment plants is spread in rural Ireland. Above all, most of the brains that run the country are from rural Ireland. We will just clarify that to start with.

First, I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. At the moment people trying to buy houses must look at them on a video. No more than the Minister of State or anyone else, when we are on video or on television, we probably look a bit better than we really do. I ask that on 5 March we let those people and young couples who are buying houses into those houses. Only one or two of them are going into the house and walking around at any one time. They are not going to spread the virus around the place. I ask the Minister of State to allow that.

Second, I ask that we do not have someone from NAMA or something similar on this Land Development Agency. I support the Land Development Agency in principle and provided it works in a certain way. I will be very clear about that. We need take the brains from the private sector to spearhead it, although let me be very clear, not on big salaries but paid based on output and delivery.

Before one can deliver houses, however, there is one company that needs to deliver, that is, Irish Water. If one does not have infrastructure for water, roads and electricity going into a site, one will build absolutely nothing. There are 135,000 units around this country owned by the State. Unfortunately, many of them do not have a sewerage scheme or road infrastructure. If that is not provided, we are in trouble. That is the reason for a properly resourced Land Development Agency with the proper people in place. The Department has had ten years and it has not delivered. It has been an unmitigated disaster. City and county councils have been depleted for the past ten to 12 years.

For God's sake, would someone bring in a bit of common sense? The inside of a three-bedroom, four-bedroom or two-bedroom house in Galway, Donegal or Dublin should be the same. There should not be five geniuses sending papers around to each other and deciding to put a different design in one. The inside of a two-bedroom, three-bedroom or four-bedroom house can be the same in every county. The facade on the outside is the only thing that has to be changed to comply with planning.

When I talk about affordable housing, I am talking about a three-bedroom or four-bedroom house that is €200,000 to €250,000 in Dublin, not houses at the figures of €400,000 that I am hearing. A couple would not be earning enough together to afford that. In this procurement process, are we going to let another conglomerate builder in with a big announcement that it will build 500 houses? If we are shrewd about it, if there are 500 houses to be built on an estate, we will let in a small builder and ask him to build ten houses. We will provide the roads and sewers in so that all the builder has to do is bring the pipework out to that and when that builder has those ten houses built, we should let him on to the next ten houses. We should put in five or six different small builders, not this big conglomerate that can screw the Government day after day for more costs that have been overlooked in the drawings. They will screw the Government. We can see what is going on with the children's hospital and the type of contract that is in place there. This can be a way to help the smaller builders to deliver on their budgets, not to go through a procurement process and decide that just because a contractor does not have such a high turnover, to say goodbye to him and leave him out of the process.

One worrying issue was brought up earlier on, namely the smaller towns around rural Ireland, in particular, in this famous Ireland 2040 framework that we are talking about. They have to have sewerage services under the county development plans now. Unfortunately, a decision was made by the previous Government that the community sewerage schemes would be scrapped and that these communities would have to tie into Irish Water. Well, just live in rural Ireland. There are some places in rural Ireland where communities ran the water for years and Irish Water was not required. It is a good job it was not required because it could not cater for all that had to be done. In those small towns, if they do not have the services, they will no longer be zoned under the Government's plan - and correct me if I am wrong - which will leave ghost towns and undeveloped towns right around the smaller rural areas. I am asking the Minister of State to remember this and to give those communities the opportunity to go back.

We need a lot of houses built fairly rapidly. I would encourage - and I have said this to the

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Minister - that the buildings that need to be built should be allowed to go ahead and the current stop on building needs to end on 5 March for the simple reason that we need houses. We also need the infrastructure, be it the shop that is being built or the other stuff that is being built. In fairness to the building sector, it has been pretty good in complying with all the different regulations. It is rather unusual to see someone building a shop down the road in a rural area being stopped, but someone coming from Northern Ireland is able to finish council houses on the Border and multinationals are working away on sites because they can get around the regulations. I ask the Minister of State to open construction sites to those sectors but, above all, to the couples that are trying to buy houses should be allowed to see the inside of the houses for God's sake.

I have spoken to the Department and I am expecting a briefing on some of these matters in the coming days. We need to make sure that if we are setting up an agency, it is not a talking shop, another cosy cartel or a front for the Department that has not delivered for ten years, and that it is not going to be a disaster. That is the one thing we have to watch for. We need to put in the proper people. We must poach people who have a proven track record at delivery. We must not put in every Tom, Dick and Harry. If that is done properly, the LDA should be able to deliver houses at an affordable rate, both to the local authorities and to young couples who are working around this country and who badly need housing. I am waiting for my briefing and I support this in principle. I want somebody to take this by the scruff of the neck. I do not want to see someone who had a cosy job somewhere else just going in for the sake of it. This should be a team with their sleeves rolled up and ready to go.

Another issue that is causing a major problem around this country is when builders apply for planning permission for developments of more than 100 houses, they have to go directly to An Bord Pleanála. Damn it but I have monitored the situation around Dublin over the past three months and 1,500 houses have been stopped over bats or some other thing that An Bord Pleanála has dreamed up in these areas, such as shadow. Shadow is another matter that is blocking developments. If we keep going down this road of allowing objections, it will block everything.

I expect to get more information from the Department. As I said, I support the agency in principle but if it is not put in place in the way I am saying, then it will work out to be another quango.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am glad to get the opportunity to contribute to the debate. However, as I sit here listening to the contributions, I wonder whether we should be debating this Bill because the LDA will do nothing to solve the housing problem in this country. That is not what I think it is intended to do anyway. I think it is intended to open up housing land to the private market and to private developers. It will be good at doing that because that is what the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage wants to achieve. We are all talking about housing, housing development, how we need to get housing built and what can be done about it but the agency will do nothing on that. It will just set up another quango so that local authorities will have to deal with it as well.

The best thing we could do to make housing work in this country is to fund local authorities to provide houses. That would be the biggest problem solved right away. Local authorities have been denuded from having the ability to develop housing. It is also interesting the way they are established, set up and run. The local authority county managers do not want to piss off the Department so the county managers will sit back and they will not develop any houses because they know the Department does not want them to develop houses but that it wants the

private sector and housing agencies to develop house so the county managers will say and do nothing because they do not want to piss off the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications because it controls approximately 85% of the money the local authorities gets. The Department, therefore, makes sure the local authorities can do nothing and the managers are happy to go along with that.

The councillors are happy to go along with it because they do not have any say in anything. They have no role as such. That is the problem with our local authorities and that is the reason we spend so much time in the national Parliament talking about the provision of houses in local authorities. It should be the job of local authorities to provide the houses and that is where it should be done. What should happen is that the Department should simply give Donegal County Council, for example, €30 million to build houses. What happens, however, is that the Department tells Donegal County Council that it would like to get proposals from it for housing developments. The local authority staff then look around to see what land they have and scratch their heads. They then decide to buy some land because it does not have any land and, therefore, it cannot put any proposals. Three or four years pass, the council buys the land, devises the scheme and submits it to the Department. It sits waiting then for the Department to decide what it will do with it. The Department will to and fro with the local authority for maybe a year and look at what is needed, and there will be tweaks here and there on the planning. Then maybe the funding will come and the local authority will build the scheme. The local authority will then have no land for the next scheme. That is what happens with this circus we have. I believe the Department should say to the local authority that there is a certain amount of funding and that it should make sure it spends it properly in developing the scheme. The Department should have a watching brief on it rather than deciding on everything the local authority does. Then one might have some responsibility and we might deliver houses in this country.

In the overall scheme of things, the Government is not interested in delivering local authority houses for people who need them. The Government is interested in the delivery of houses by developers in the private sector. That is where the Government is coming from. The whole focus of the Government's thinking on housing is wrong. The reality is the Government is thinking about how developers can get work and how we can deliver work to developers, not how we can deliver houses to citizens. If the Government took the view that its role is to deliver houses for citizens, this would be a completely different discussion and we would not even be discussing a land development agency Bill. That is my reaction to the debate, what I have been hearing and what has been said by other Members in relation to this Bill. I think it misses the point.

The LDA is a quango. The great Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-Green Party idea is to set up an agency to do the work that is already being done or should be getting done by local authorities around the country. In 2020, Donegal County Council opened four social housing developments. It had been more than a decade without building social housing in my constituency, not because of a lack of ability to develop or anything like it but because of a lack of funds made available.

The LDA has been in existence since 2018 but this Bill will dissolve that entity and provide for the transfer of its assets, functions and staff, etc., to the new agency. The agency will establish - wait for it - a register of relevant public land. The agency will report periodically to the Government on public land which may be suitable for housing or urban development, and it will also assist local authorities in the performance of their functions relating to development. Groundhog Day was 2 February. It is certainly here again today.

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Opposition Deputies, local authorities and front-line civil society groups are blue in the face from saying for years that the Government must provide the necessary funding to local authorities to build affordable housing on public-owned land. My blood was boiling when reading this Bill, the explanatory memorandum and the relevant documents. Section 14 of the Bill sets out the process for local authorities to request services from the agency. A ministerial direction may have to be made and there will be terms under which the agency's services will be provided. This is exactly what our failed housing system needs - more bureaucracy. It is vitally important that we have that. That allows the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to keep a tight fist and control on the spending of money. That is what this is all about.

The board will be made up of five to ten directors, all of whom are to be appointed by the Minister. Section 22 of the Bill provides for the disclosure of interests of board members, staff of the agency or a subsidiary designated activity company.

Debate adjourned.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - an update on a new special school in Cork and progress in identifying a suitable building or site; (2) Deputy Alan Farrell - the need for increased supports for the Irish aviation industry; (3) Deputy James Lawless - the availability and roll-out schedule for broadband in rural Kildare; (4) Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh - Ireland's progress in implementing the sustainable development goals across Departments; (5) Deputy Michael McNamara - the disabled drivers' and passengers' scheme; (6) Deputies Fergus O'Dowd, Ged Nash, Dara Calleary and Kieran O'Donnell - the location of mass Covid-19 vaccination centres; (7) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - ministerial consent for construction of the Arklow wastewater treatment plant to proceed; (8) Deputy Colm Burke - the identification of a site for an elective hospital in Cork and the level of consultation with the two voluntary hospitals in Cork city; (9) Deputy Catherine Murphy - the proposed relocation of Horse Sport Ireland to a new site at Greenogue in Dublin; (10) Deputy Niamh Smyth - extending the lifetime of the mother and baby homes commission beyond 28 February; (11) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the ongoing challenges facing third level students due to their student accommodation costs; (12) Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - progress on obtaining legal aid for the Stardust inquests; (13) Deputy Neale Richmond - the need for clarity regarding the classification of essential construction at level 5 restrictions; (14) Deputy Verona Murphy - the reason the current HSE allowances for wigs and hairpieces differ depending on location in Ireland; (15) Deputy Pat Buckley - coastal erosion at Pilmore Cottages in Youghal, County Cork; (16) Deputy Jim O'Callaghan - the recent statement by the Ombudsman for Children that children have been failed by adults and the system during the pandemic; (17) Deputy Chris Andrews - the closure of the section 37A process for autism spectrum disorder in south Dublin; (18) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - the Minister for Health's plans to streamline the process of seeking a refund of phlebotomy charges incorrectly incurred by medical card patients; (19) Deputy Brian Stanley - improved access for children to psychological assessments, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy in Laois and Offaly; (20) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - issues with the Bandon water main and sewer network upgrade; (21) Deputy Sorca Clarke - the pollution of our inland waterways system; (22) Deputy Gino Kenny - recent attacks on Deliveroo workers in Dublin city centre and the

community response; (23) Deputy Holly Cairns - the situation in Ashbourne House direct provision centre in Cork, where residents are refusing meals provided in protest at food suitability and standards; (24) Deputy Matt Carthy - current funding plans for the opening of the group home in Carrickmacross for people with physical and sensory disabilities; (25) Deputy Thomas Gould - the continued closure of SouthDoc in Blackpool and Listowel; (26) Deputy Bríd Smith - the campaign for a people's vaccine to increase vaccine supply and access in the developing world; and (27) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - the CAMHS service in north county Dublin.

The matters raised by Deputies Pádraig O'Sullivan, Catherine Murphy, Niamh Smyth and Sorca Clarke have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I have raised this issue consistently with the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, both in the Chamber and when I have an opportunity at the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. I will continue to raise it because it is an issue of contention in Cork and it needs to be addressed urgently. Any clarification that the Minister of State could give today would be most welcome.

I will give a couple of facts that detail the situation we face in Cork. In area CHO 4, as per the HSE designation, there are over 1,000 children awaiting assessment of needs. A high proportion of these are from Cork and a significant number would require a place in a special needs school. The nearest special school, Scoil Cara, opened in 2014. This was a fantastic purpose-built facility. It currently has an enrolment of 71 students but with a capacity of 72. That is essentially full.

Following on from that, there are also 22 children in Cork who do not have a place in a special school at present and are not in any school. They are most likely receiving home tuition. In addition to those 22 children, there are 40 children in special class placements who remain on the waiting list for a special school. That amounts to more than 60 children in Cork who currently do not have a place in a special school but are entitled to one.

In response to a previous inquiry I made, there may be capacity for enrolment of four to six children in Rochestown in September 2021, but that is it. That leaves 56 children or so, as of now, with no special school place come September 2021. Our experience with Covid shows that these students suffer the most in the absence of the ability to get to school. What can we say to the 56 children who have no prospect of returning to any school for the next academic year?

Some work has been done to progress the idea of a new special school. I welcome the input of Department and, in particular, Cope into this process. I note that a report was submitted to the Department of Education on 12 October last in relation to a technical report on a nearby building, Montenotte House. That technical report surmised that the building was not able to deliver much-needed places in the short term. While I have not seen the contents of that technical report, Montenotte House is a protected building and, most likely, is unsuitable to cater for lifts and widening of doors, etc., for persons with disability. I would imagine that has put

considerable restrictions on the building's ability to deliver much-needed places.

I understand that a further meeting took place on 3 November. I am not entirely sure of the outcome of that meeting. Perhaps the Minister of State could elaborate on it for me. I am led to believe from speaking to people locally that in response to the technical report that Cope submitted to the Department before Christmas, in addition to stating that the Montenotte House building was unsuitable to cater for children in special education, Cope essentially offered part of its office block on site for conversion. If that is the case, I wonder if the Minister of State could clarify where we are at with that process.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. He is correct when he says he consistently raises it with me in the Chamber and at the joint committee. He is correct to do so because it is an important issue for children with special needs in County Cork. This opportunity gives me a chance to outline the provision that we are giving for children with special educational needs, in general and also in Cork.

Departmental policy is that children with special educational needs should be included, where possible and appropriate, in mainstream placements with additional supports provided. In circumstances where children with special educational needs require more specialised interventions, special school or special class places are provided for. This year, the State will invest over 20% of its total education budget, or €2 billion, in supporting children with special needs. As a result, even though there is more progress to be made, the numbers of special education teachers, special needs assistants, special classes and special school places are at unprecedented levels.

Since 2011, the number of special classes in mainstream schools has increased by almost 235% from 548 to 1,836 for the 2020-21 school year. Nationally, 197 new special classes have been established for the 2020-21 school year.

Budget 2021 also provided for an extra 235 special class teachers this year, supporting the provision of more than 1,200 additional special class places; an extra 990 SNAs, meaning that more than 18,000 SNAs will be available for allocation to schools this year; an additional 145 special education teachers, bringing the total provision to 13,765 in mainstream primary and post-primary schools; and an additional 23 special education teachers to be allocated to meet increased enrolments in special schools.

Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, I am acutely aware that there are some parts of the country where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places, for example, in Cork. It is accepted that additional specialist education places are urgently required in the Cork area. The Department's school building programme is focused on providing the additional school places to ensure every child, including children with special needs, has a school place. This includes opening new schools and extending existing schools in areas where more school places are needed to meet the growing number of children living there.

The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, has responsibility for co-ordinating and advising on the education provision for children with special educational needs nationwide. It has well-established structures for engaging with schools and parents. The NCSE seeks to ensure schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as

needing special education placements. It continues to work with and support the families who have a recommendation for, and are seeking to secure, a special school placement.

A number of meetings between the Department, the NCSE and relevant stakeholders, including patron bodies, have taken place to consider how the demand for special school placements in Cork can be met. This engagement is ongoing. The NCSE is aware there are 20 children who are not in school and who require special school places. The Deputy mentioned a figure of 22, so the number is either 20 or 22. These children are getting home tuition, but that is not satisfactory. All options are being explored, including ascertaining the availability of any accommodation in existing schools that could be used as a short-term solution, the availability of lands where temporary accommodation could be provided, and the option of a greenfield site where a new school could be constructed.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State for her response. At the outset, I meant to acknowledge the good work that had been done in special needs education over the past decade in particular. We have more special needs assistants, SNAs, and special education teachers than ever before, but we must be cognisant of the fact we also have more children than ever with a diagnosis of some description on the spectrum. Hence the pressure we are under to facilitate places for them in special schools.

While I welcome the Minister of State's response, I would welcome any clarification she could give regarding the meetings in Cork between the NCSE, the Cope Foundation and her Department. In the initial technical report, three options were considered - short, medium and long-term. I understand the option of converting Montenotte House was the short-term option. Now that it seems to have been ruled out following the technical report submitted, will the Minister of State clarify what the medium- and long-term options are? Would they entail greenfield sites? I am aware the Cope Foundation has essentially offered its office and administration buildings in Montenotte for conversion into classrooms, which I have been informed could facilitate up to 25 or 30 children. If the Minister of State is aware of this offer, will she comment on it? This would not be about doing a short-term fix just for the sake of it. Not only would it be the quickest solution for the September 2021 intake, it would also be on campus with the existing facilities. It makes total sense to explore this option.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Short-term options are being considered, for example, if any other vacant accommodation is available in an existing school in Cork city. In addition, a number of building projects in Cork are being re-examined for potential capacity. The process is ongoing and includes engagement with local patrons and the education and training board, ETB. Options for the provision of a special school in Cork are also being examined. The Deputy will be aware there were meetings between the Department, the NCSE, the school's management and the Cope Foundation regarding Scoil Aislínn, whose patron is the Cope Foundation and which is located on Boreenmanna Road, Ballintemple, Cork, to explore the school's expansion and other options that would facilitate the enrolment of children who are without a school placement currently. My understanding is there will be another meeting in February to explore these options further and determine whether they would be feasible.

My Department will continue to support the NCSE and schools through the provision of the necessary funding and capital investment to ensure all children succeed in accessing education. In Cork, a concentrated effort is required by the Department, the NCSE and me. It is important that every child with special needs is catered for. It is not acceptable that school places are not available to the children who are waiting on them. The Deputy has raised this matter many

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times. A meeting will be held in February and I hope progress will come from it so that the children in question, particularly the 20 who are not in a school and are availing of the home tuition scheme, will be able to get school places. There are other children who have recommendations for school places and who are in special classes currently. They need to be considered as well.

Horse Sport Ireland

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this time-sensitive issue for discussion, and while I thank the Minister of State for being present to answer, I regret the Minister or a Minister of State from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is not present.

Horse Sport Ireland, HSI, was set up in 2007 and had a desire to establish a centre of excellence from the outset. It does good work with its 24 affiliates, which cross the spectrum from pony clubs to Olympic-level equestrian bodies. The decision regarding a centre of excellence must take on board the requirements of all these affiliates. The State has a controlling interest in HSI. In 2018, the then Minister, Deputy Creed, restructured the body, enabling him to appoint a chairperson and the majority of the directors of the board. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is the competent authority. The various stud books administered by HSI generate an income, but €6 million of its income of approximately €7 million comes from State funding.

HSI has entered into terms with a privately owned equestrian centre, with an obligation to spend between €7 million and €12 million on developing the centre and renting it for 35 years. What will happen to that investment after 35 years? None of the 24 affiliates were informed in advance of the location's announcement, which was issued in late December. There was a subsequent consultation with all of them over Zoom, but it only lasted for approximately an hour, which is not the level of consultation needed where such a long-term enterprise is concerned.

While I do not profess to have any expertise in what HSI and its affiliates do, I have a good understanding of process and the importance of transparency. A good, robust and transparent approach that properly scopes out needs and considers all location and funding options, including mortgage options, should be part of a process that is worked out with the affiliates. I would have expected finding a site to come at the end of the process. What did the Department and Minister know of this? Will it be looked at again?

There are a number of issues with regard to the Greenogue facility to which I want to draw attention. It has been pointed out by some of the affiliates that it simply will not meet their needs. A portion of the 30-acre site at Greenogue has been frozen and this is to facilitate, in time, the western Dublin orbital route to link the N3, N4 and N7. This would impact on the ability to develop the facilities.

There was express reference in the planning permission to concerns regarding traffic volumes as this is primarily a residential area. Greenogue is currently in contravention of the existing planning permission. It has planning for private use that expressly prohibits competition and other commercial activities. Horse Sport Ireland has engaged a consultant, Colm McCarthy, to advise on this issue but in actual fact it would be better placed pausing this and taking the time to include its affiliates. There was an Indecon report in 2017 which stated Horse Sport Ireland should obtain the views of various subsectors of the industry, and the position of the

stakeholders is of real value to Horse Sport Ireland in making the correct decisions. The report also recommended that Horse Sport Ireland's directors receive some accreditation and further training in the area of corporate governance.

This matter is time sensitive. Let us make a good decision on this. Let us work in the interest of all of the 24 affiliates. It needs to be paused.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Horse Sport Ireland is the national governing body for equestrian sport in Ireland. It is recognised by the Fédération Equestre Internationale, the Irish Sports Council, the Olympic Council of Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland. It was established in 2007, when the Equestrian Federation of Ireland and the Irish Horse Board were amalgamated, bringing together the breeding and competition sectors. It is a company limited by guarantee that operates independently of the Department. It receives funds from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and was in receipt of funds from the former Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport through Sport Ireland. Horse Sport Ireland receives an annual grant, which is €5 million this year, from the Department in recognition of its work in promoting and developing the Irish sport horse sector and also receives funding from a share of an equine infrastructure grant scheme operated by the Department. The scheme is aimed at fostering breeding, marketing, educational and disease prevention research within the horse sector.

In 2015, a strategy report on the future of the sport horse industry, *Reaching New Heights: Report of Irish Sport Horse Industry Strategy Committee*, was published. This envisaged a centre of excellence for breeding, sport and coaching, providing breeding resources, making breeding technologies available, providing support for training riders and coaches through the national system of training for riders, coaches, and producers and providing support for inspection centre as well as sales, opportunities for training of young horses with talent and the provision of top class schoolmasters for the training of young riders among its services.

As recommended in this report, and as mentioned by the Deputy, a review of the structures of Horse Sport Ireland has been conducted by Indecon International Consultants, and its report with recommendations has been published. Indecon recommended the rationalisation of the boards. This has now been undertaken.

In its 2021 budget submission, Horse Sport Ireland said that it believed that a national centre as part of a hub-and-spoke model for the development of the industry would be an extremely worthwhile venture to underpin the industry. It stated that such a centre would enable an holistic approach to the sector, providing a world class environment for the production of horses, the provision of equine services, industry training and the promotion of an outstanding product, and that it would bring much cohesion to the sector providing a focal point for a very fragmented industry. The budget submission figures produced regarding the national centre of excellence were merely indicative and not specific to any particular site or venue and involved the development of a green field site. No additional capital funding was provided for this purpose.

As the Deputy pointed out, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, is aware that Horse Sport Ireland is considering relocating to a new site as part of the establishment of a new headquarters and a national centre of excellence. It is envisaged that the centre will provide a world class environment for the production of horses, the provision of equine services, industry training and promotion. Horse Sport Ireland has had the objective of having a defined headquarters and a national training and breeding centre since its inception. I will bring the concerns raised by the Deputy about the Greenogue facility and what the Minister

did or did not know to his attention that of the Department following this discussion.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I agree that there is an awful lot in what the Minister of State has said. I also agree that a centre of excellence is a really good idea and would have a unifying aspect. I saw this with the sports campus. There were benefits in the national sports campus that went beyond what was expected. I completely accept that the sport horse sector does need a higher standard of competition facilities. I am not questioning this need. Neither am I opposing it being supported by means of grants and public funds. However, let us not make the mistake of not consulting the affiliate organisations that require their needs to be met by this. Let us not, for expediency, make the mistake of picking a site that may not be the right site. It could end up being the right site but it has not gone through the type of process that would be unifying in determining and scoping out the needs and considering the funding options. These are the issues.

There are significant planning issues and constraints in this location. I ask that the Minister of State go back to the Minister and his Department and inform them in the strongest terms that they really need to look at this because it will be primarily public money that will go into developing this. Let us make sure that when it is developed, wherever it is developed, it will be something of which we will all be very proud and we will not be asking why somebody did not point out something in advance of making a decision. All I am looking for is that the correct decision is made, that there is proper consultation and that process and transparency matter.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I am advised that the board examined a number of sites in the context of choosing a location for its headquarters and the national centre for excellence. This was part of a selection process carried out by a subcommittee of the board. A detailed feasibility study for the centre was carried out. I understand Horse Sport Ireland appointed an independent consultant to carry out this study following a competitive request for tender. It also advises that the work of the subcommittee has been ongoing for two years and has involved the consideration of many different locations. It also advises that it engaged with a range of potential sites and hired a property valuer and adviser to review property and land offerings as well as the availability of property to purchase, rent or develop. The subcommittee also examined options not involving additional State funding.

Regarding consultation with affiliates, which the Deputy mentioned, Horse Sport Ireland indicates that it has engaged with all Olympic and paralympic discipline affiliates on the Greengogue proposal, including Showjumping Ireland, Eventing Ireland, Dressage Ireland and Para Equestrian Ireland. It indicates that it has also met its equestrian sport and recreation affiliates, ranging from the Association of Irish Riding Clubs, riding establishments, mounted games, endurance, the Irish Quarter Horse Association, the Irish Pony Club, the Irish Pony Society, TREC Ireland, the Riding for the Disabled Association and the Irish Shows Association to discuss the matter. I understand that these affiliate bodies encapsulate approximately 30,000 participants in Ireland.

I hope this clarifies for the House the background to the proposal, which the board of Horse Sport Ireland is now endeavouring to progress. I agree with the Deputy that the right decision should be made and ultimately it is a decision for the Board of Horse Sport Ireland to make. I thank the Deputy for her interest in this topic.

6 o'clock

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Minister for coming to the House to facilitate our discussion on the commission for mother and baby homes, in particular the legal lifetime of the commission which is due to conclude on 28 February. The report from the commission reveals a very dark and disturbing chapter in our history, a history which none of us should ever forget. It is a piece of our history that should be recorded and archived to ensure that the 550 testimonies which make up the vast majority of survivor evidence is retained and protected.

I appreciate and am aware that the Minister has written to the commission in respect of the audio recordings and tapes allegedly destroyed on the grounds that survivors were promised they would remain anonymous. He and I know that was not the understanding of the survivors. The commission stated that it made clear to survivors that records would be destroyed, but the Minister and I know that in the leaflet presented to them there was no reference to the destruction of tapes or to the records being destroyed. To be fair, how could the Minister pre-empt the destruction of records?

Section 43 of the Commissions of Investigations Act 2004 clearly states that every piece of evidence gathered by a commission of investigation shall be transferred to the relevant Minister. How could the Minister expect or even imagine the deletion of records might happen? Nobody could anticipate that the commission of investigation would breach that clear commitment and destroy evidence without the permission of those who gave it.

The commission never stated it would keep a transcript of what survivors said and that their evidence was to be destroyed without a full transcript. I do not believe that in this day and age, when technology is at its best, that evidence cannot be retrieved. It must be retrieved. We must extend the legal lifetime of the commission.

We must remember that the survivors have rights and under GDPR their data rights have been breached. For that reason alone, we must act now and extend the lifetime of the commission. At the very least, the State owes the survivors the transparency they deserve.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. I understand the anger of survivors regarding the deletion of tapes. For a long time, they have felt that their voices have not been heard and this action is compounding that anger and frustration.

I am aware of recent calls for the timeframe of the commission to be extended to enable it to deal with concerns relating to the audio recordings made by the confidential committee. The commission is independent in its operation. It has stated that each witness at the confidential committee was given a guarantee of complete anonymity and it was for this reason that the tapes were deleted. The commission has repeatedly stated that this process and the associated actions were carried out with the knowledge of survivors. However, as Deputy Smyth has said, it is clear some survivors do not share that view.

Since the concerns about the deletion of the audiotape was brought to my attention, I have engaged intensively with the Attorney General, the Data Protection Commissioner and the commission of investigation on this point. I am working to achieve a solution that ensures that survivors’ voices are heard. As I stated to the Joint Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration earlier this week, on 8 February I wrote to the commission of investigation to

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ask it to ascertain whether the deleted recordings could be retrieved. The commission replied to me on Tuesday, stating, “It seems we are unable to retrieve the recordings”.

However, I am engaging further with the commission so I can conclusively ascertain whether there are any available technical solutions which may allow the retrieval of the missing data and this engagement is ongoing. When the issue of the deleted audio files was raised I asked my officials to examine whether the right to rectification under Article 16 of GDPR could be applied as a mechanism to address the issue of deleted tape recordings. This gives data subjects the right to have incomplete personal data about themselves completed, including by means of providing a supplementary statement. This is one of a number of GDPR rights that survivors of the mother and baby homes may be entitled to.

When the commission is dissolved, its archive will transfer to my Department. I know from my engagement with survivors how important access to information is, in particular access to personal information within the archive. Last October, the Attorney General clarified that when the archive transfers to my Department the rights of GDPR will apply. This was an important development and opens up the possibility of survivors being able to access crucial personal information in the archive.

My officials are preparing intensively for the Department’s role in the management of the archive and are committed to having robust processes in place for managing information access requests in full compliance with GDPR. We have worked with the Data Protection Commissioner and sought advice from the Attorney General and external data protection experts on this point.

While I remain open to exploring all of the avenues that will best serve survivors, at this point it is not clear that additional time for the commission will necessarily assist in this regard. In practical terms, the commission has commenced the initial process of transferring its records to my Department. If it was extended, with the archive transferring to my Department as suggested, it is difficult to see how it could engage with any further investigation if it did not have access to its records.

If there was legislation for an extension, with the archive remaining with the commission, this would mean the commission would remain as data controller and make decisions on subject access requests, which it has always denied up to this point. The possibility of an extension also raises complex legal questions. I am engaging with the Attorney General on the specific matters. It is unclear how a proposed extension could overcome the complex legal matters associated with such a move or how best survivors could be served, in particular those who seek access to the commission’s archive.

A decision on further action will be informed by the ongoing urgent engagement that is taking place with the commission, the Data Protection Commissioner and the Attorney General. I am happy to update the Deputy and the House on any further developments.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. There is a commitment in section 43 of the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 that all information gathered will be kept as evidence. That is a basic and simple principle that we would all understand commissions of investigation to operate on.

I appreciate that the Minister has written to and awaits the advice of the Office of the Attorney General on this. However, we must remember the human life stories of the survivors who

are listening to the debate and feel further anxiety and hurt is being piled on top of them after a number of years of waiting for a conclusion to all of this.

The positive aspect of this is the transfer of the archives to the Minister's Department so that people can finally access their details. However, it is difficult to understand how this commission of investigation could think for one second that the destruction of records and deletion of evidence could be in any way appropriate or helpful in terms of what it was trying to achieve. I cannot reconcile in my head how professionals at that level could think for one second that would be acceptable.

I appeal to the Minister to consider an extension. There are still a number of days until 28 February. I appreciate he is getting the legal advice necessary, but let us not cause any more unnecessary hurt to the survivors. If we have clear and concrete answers in terms of retrieving the information, evidence and records, I am sure survivors would be happy to move on with the next stage. In the absence of that and in the absence of the information I ask the Minister to continue to work night and day, as I know he is, to ensure that survivors have that transparency.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I am acutely aware of the very human stories and the real upset this has caused to survivors. I have engaged and continue to engage with survivors. My absolute priority is to see if there is a technical solution to seek to retrieve that information and those recordings. That is what we are looking at currently. We will continue to engage intensively with the commission on that point, to see if we can retrieve data. In the event that does not manifest, we are looking at the right to rectification and the potential right for each survivor to be able to ensure there is a statement of the survivor's testimony on the record of the commission's archive and to ensure their voices are heard.

I also want to emphasise what I see was a fundamental policy shift that we saw last October in terms of the GDPR access to the archive and the ability of the tens of thousands of former residents of mother and baby homes and county institutions to submit subject access requests to get that essential early-life information that they have been denied for so long. I am incredibly reluctant to take any action which I feel will delay the ability of survivors to start to use those mechanisms under GDPR. That must be borne in mind in our considerations and I know the Deputy recognises that. As I said, work is ongoing on all elements of this with regard to a technical solution, rectification and looking at the wider question of what is feasible in terms of an extension. It is a difficult and complex question, but all elements continue to be examined.

Water Pollution

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, for taking the time to address this matter, which is quite prevalent in the constituency he and I represent. In a vast majority of cases people do not tend to have many interactions with different State bodies, unless there is a specific reason. What has happened, over generations in some cases, is that there has been very little expectation of the State in certain matters. However, people have one basic expectation and it is one that is shared across most of the developed world. They expect not to have the smell of fecal matter in their residential areas or to have other sewage floating into their communities and onto their farms from nearby rivers. Unfortunately, that is happening not only in my constituency but also in too many places across the country.

Due to insufficient infrastructure on the Shannon, in particular, and poor planning of housing

developments as well as a considerable number of contributory factors, water is being drained into the sewerage system during high floods and then released back into river systems. This was also mentioned during the debate on the Land Development Agency Bill 2021 by another Deputy. In my area, residents in and around Athlone have been complaining for years about the odours coming from waters that are flowing very close to their homes in many cases. They have consistently raised concerns about the health implications, the impact this is having on their property prices, their reduced standard of living and their ability to enjoy their community fully.

Large parts of Athlone's existing network are based on combined sewers, which is a sewage collection system designed also to collect surface water run-off. Combined sewers can cause serious water pollution problems during combined sewer overflow events when wet weather flows exceed the sewage treatment plant's capacity. Works to rectify this are ongoing and the residents are happy about that. However, last year, the European Court of Justice ruled that the Irish Government had breached its environmental obligations in several locations across the country. This is not new, therefore, either to the Government or to residents. The European Commission had initially given a deadline of 2005 to resolve the nationwide problem of raw sewage being discharged into rivers.

The impact this has outside of the residential areas is also quite profound in areas of natural beauty and potential tourist attractions. Recently, in Lilliput, another area of Westmeath, the bathing waters were again rated as poor, which also happened in 2018. It is an incredibly popular area. We are lucky to be from what is known as the lake county, given the bodies of water we have, but the way we are taking care of them and valuing them is simply not fit for purpose. It is not just an issue for local residents. Due to the impact this is having, our ecology, wildlife and biodiversity are being damaged. We cannot expect to have a vibrant aquamarine system when we are polluting the waterways to such an extent.

The effect this has on fish and plant life in our waters is detrimental and in many cases devastating. One need only speak to some of the local anglers or a marine biologist in the area to hear them say the same. This is on top of the lack of regulation and enforcement in respect of toxic pesticides. Moreover, there are numerous instances of oil spills and other industrial residue being pumped into the waterways and lakes across the State.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank my constituency colleague, Deputy Clarke, for raising this issue and providing me with an opportunity to give an overview of the current work being undertaken to address the quality of our waters.

Water quality in Ireland is facing complex pressures and increasing demands due to population change and a previously growing economy that we all hope will continue after we emerge for the current pandemic, as well as a changing climate. The EU Water Framework Directive establishes a common approach framework for the protection of inland surface waters, transitional waters, coastal waters and groundwater. The overall aim of the directive is to maintain high quality and good status waters where they exist and to restore waters that do not meet these criteria. River basin management planning, structured in six-year cycles, is the tool prescribed by the directive for achieving these aims.

Our policy is to ensure we provide the right measure in the right place. It is clear that one-size-fits-all measures are not fully effective. Where the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, identifies agriculture as a significant pressure, a free advisory service is now available to

farmers in priority areas. Where urban wastewater is causing an impact, Irish Water is investing in improved services and infrastructure. The Government also improved the financial supports to help bring domestic septic tanks up to standard.

However, our rivers, lakes and estuaries are all complex, natural systems. An ongoing cycle of assessment and planning must continue in tandem with the implementation of measures to protect and improve water quality. In this regard, as one of the commitments in the programme for Government, we plan to launch a new revised and strengthened river basin management plan in 2022 to protect Ireland's water quality and ensure we have a well-protected environment and vibrant communities.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I appreciate the reply from the Minister of State. In reality, while we have these bodies and authorities that are responsible for certain areas, it has been my experience that when an issue emerges, such as an oil spill on a body of water, it is treated essentially like a hot potato. It is passed from one to the other and another until somebody finally takes responsibility, but at that point the damage has already been done. These are not isolated incidents that happen now and again. They are happening far too often and sometimes there are severe cases. They have a huge impact, far beyond what they would have if there had been quicker responses. Unless comprehensive legislation to protect our waterways is brought forward quickly, the situation will continue to get worse.

Many of our rivers and lakes are already in a critical condition, their biodiversity is severely reduced and the numbers of fish and other wildlife has been depleted. The possible health and economic side effects are more reasons for us to take urgent action before it is too late. It is not good enough for any agency of the State to avoid responsibility. That is something we have seen far too often, namely, where the matter is kicked down the road in the hope that it will become somebody else's problem or that someone else will pick it up as an issue to be addressed. That is something that requires time but when it comes to issues such as this, we do not have the luxury of time. There needs to be a much more urgent and coherent approach to these events when they happen. What is needed is a radical new approach to how we treat our natural water sources. In order to achieve meaningful results, we need to provide the authorities with powers that they can actually enforce. We need sewerage and defence systems and regulations around pesticides and run off material, but we also need to crack down on the dumping of industrial waste, rubbish and any other waste material into our waters. We need to see these people prosecuted for their actions.

Deputy Peter Burke: I again thank Deputy Clarke for her comments on this matter, many of which I agree with. As part of the implementation of the EU water framework directive in Ireland, the EPA is charged with monitoring water status in order to establish a comprehensive overview of the water quality within each river basin district. The EPA's most recent report in this regard sets out in stark terms the current and future challenges we, as a country and as a society, face, but it also points the way forward with practical and positive, though perhaps not painless, actions that must be taken in order to address these issues.

My Department is preparing for the third river basin management plan for Ireland to cover the period 2022 to 2027. Building on the work on the second cycle, this plan will again describe the main pressures and activities affecting water status, set out the environmental objectives to be achieved up to 2027 and identify the measures needed to achieve these objectives, including those highlighted by the EPA. However, given the extent, depth and complexities of the measures required, it is now more important than ever that all sectors of society engage fully

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and take all the necessary actions to protect and improve our water quality. With a draft river basin management plan due to be published shortly and put out for a six-month public consultation, I take this opportunity to urge all stakeholders to engage in the process and ensure that we achieve the best possible water quality in our rivers and lakes.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.25 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 24 February 2021.