



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 2 Samhain 2021

Tuesday, 2 November 2021

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: Before proceeding to Leaders' Questions, for the information of the House, I have just been presented with a report from the forum on a family-friendly and inclusive Parliament. The forum was established in March and I asked it to consider coming up with practical and achievable recommendations that would help the Houses of the Oireachtas continue to develop as a family-friendly parliamentary community that is diverse, inclusive and better reflects society in Ireland today. It was serendipity rather than good planning that resulted in the report being published on the day on which the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, returns to work at her Department.

I thank all members of the forum for their work, especially the chairman, Dr. Mary Upton, who is a former Deputy. They have spent a significant amount of time considering how the Parliament operates and how to improve it and have managed to produce a comprehensive and significant report with 51 detailed recommendations. I thank Breda Burke and her team in the Houses of the Oireachtas Service who have given such steadfast to the work of the forum.

I believe it is important that serving in Parliament is attractive and open to all citizens to consider and that will be encouraged if the Oireachtas is a welcome and supportive community for all. I will be considering the report in detail and all of its recommendations and will be bringing it to the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission for its consideration. For Members who are interested, the report will be available on the Oireachtas website shortly.

I welcome the members of the forum who are in the Public Gallery and thank them for the service they have given. I advise the House that they will be continuing to monitor our work in implementing their recommendations.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: The first question today comes from the acting leader of Sinn Féin, Deputy Cullinane.

Deputy David Cullinane: That is quite an elevation. Hospitals are at breaking point. Several have already begun cancelling scheduled care to cope with overflows from record emergency department admissions. Yesterday morning, more than 515 patients were admitted to hospital without a bed. They were left on trolleys or chairs in ward corners, corridors and waiting rooms. Last week, more than 1,800 patients were languishing on hospital trolleys. The Saolta University Health Care Group, which serves the north-west and west regions, is worst affected, along with Limerick, Cork and Waterford university hospitals.

The cancellation of elective and often time-sensitive care is unsustainable. It will lead to the worsening of conditions, physical health and mental well-being. Last month, the chief executive officer of the University Limerick Hospitals Group stated that the Irish Patients Association is quite right to point out that significant reductions in scheduled care are not sustainable in the long term.

The truth is that we need more staff and capacity in public hospitals but this Government and the previous Government have failed to deliver. Consequently, many healthcare staff are considering leaving the service. They tell me that all the time. It does not give them any pleasure to do so, but they say it is because they do not feel valued or respected and they are burnt out. Day in, day out, healthcare workers are dealing with crisis after crisis on the front line. They forgo lunch and annual leave because they know that if they take such breaks, they will heap more pressure on their colleagues and cause patients to suffer. This level of moral injury is unsustainable and unacceptable. The Tánaiste will have seen recently front-line nurses have been protesting outside some hospitals because of unsafe staffing levels. What is the Government's plan to address the appalling working conditions to help retain our highly skilled healthcare workers?

I am also hoping the Tánaiste can confirm the Government's intention to address the issues raised by student nurses and midwives, who are again protesting outside the Dáil today. They should not have to protest. It is disgraceful that people who are trying to do their best in our health services have to come to the Dáil to protest to get the Minister for Health to act on what has been a running sore and a long-running issue, namely, fair pay and allowances for student nurses and midwives. A temporary pandemic payment was put in place at the end of this academic year, but we need a permanent solution. That means a permanent solution for fourth years and for first, second and third years.

I am shocked, but not surprised, that the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, and, indeed, other healthcare trade unions learned of the changes to the intern pay rates in *The Irish Times* this morning, like everyone else. This is an industrial relations issue; they should not have to wait to read it in the newspapers. There should have been discussions with the public health trade unions, and yet that is not what happened.

What is happening is unacceptable. Student nurses are telling me in their droves, and I have met many student nurses and midwives over the course of the past year, that they want to work in our public health services and be part of ensuring we deliver the best, world-class healthcare services we all want. However, if they do not feel valued and respected, they are going to leave. We need to recruit and retain more nurses.

When will the McHugh review be published to give clarity on its recommendations? Will there be discussions and negotiations with the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation and other healthcare trade unions so that fair pay and allowances can be put in place for student

nurses and midwives?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. For many in society, when it comes to the pandemic, things are largely back to normal. Many people are able to go back to their workplaces and schools, colleges, shops and businesses are open. For our hospitals, however, the pandemic is as bad as it ever was. There are 500 people in hospital with Covid today and almost 100 people in ICU. Hospitals are trying to manage Covid care as well as regular healthcare, and there is a big backlog of unmet need, given that non-Covid care was reduced so much during the initial phase of the pandemic. Therefore, hospitals are very busy at the moment. People in our hospitals and across our health service are working extremely hard. We are facing into a very busy winter as we try to manage the pandemic, provide regular care and address the unmet needs of those whose healthcare needs were not met during the pandemic. We acknowledge the extraordinary work of all our health service workers in that regard.

On the issue of student nurses, which I am aware the Deputy has raised and has a real interest in, it is the Government's policy to protect and support the continued education of all students, including student nurses and midwives. A longer term review of matters related to student nurse and midwife allowances and internship pay has been conducted by Mr. Sean McHugh. I am advised the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, will outline his plans regarding the report shortly, and these plans include a 12.5% increase in payments to student nurses and midwives in their internship year and a continuation of the pandemic placement grant. Payments may be required to be backdated to October.

While they are on their clinical placements, student nurses and midwives in years 1, 2 and 3 and in the first semester of year 4 continue to receive a weekly accommodation allowance of €50.79 as well as reimbursement of their travel costs. Supernumerary student nurses and midwives also received an additional and exceptional pandemic placement grant during the academic year of 2020 to 2021. This was designed to support them with undertaking clinical placements during the pandemic. As the pandemic is still continuing and staff in hospitals face particular challenges, the pandemic placement grant will continue to be paid. The Minister for Health will announce details of this shortly. The pandemic placement grant was introduced by the Minister as an exceptional payment to support students attending clinical placements during the last academic year. As the pandemic is still ongoing and staff in hospitals continue to face particular challenges, this grant will continue to be paid. The Minister, Deputy Donnelly, will announce further details as soon as possible.

Deputy David Cullinane: We will have to wait and see exactly what is in the memo the Minister brings to Cabinet. The reality is there have been three meetings between the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation and the HSE. This is an industrial relations issue, and yet that healthcare trade union and those student nurses and midwives outside the Dáil had to read in a newspaper what may or may not be in the memo. I ask the Tánaiste directly whether there will be engagement with the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation on precisely what is in the memo.

The Tánaiste has outlined what might be in place for first, second and third years. It is unacceptable. This is an emergency pandemic payment of €100 which many of them said fell far short. There is no sense this will be permanent. There is no sense any permanent solution is being put in place for first, second and third years.

I do not believe the Tánaiste gets it. If he were outside today, like many of us were, speaking

to those student nurses and midwives they are telling us directly, and it does not give me any pleasure to say this, that they do not feel valued and that the first chance they get they will be gone. Let us avoid them going. Let us treat them fairly and with respect.

Will the Tánaiste also explain when the recognition payment that was promised for those on the front line and in healthcare will be paid? We heard about it before the budget and during the budget. There was a lot of talk about this exceptional payment for those on the front line in healthcare. We have heard nothing since.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. There will, of course, be engagement between the Minister and the HSE on one hand and the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation and SIPTU health on the other on this issue of student nurses and student midwives which, as the Deputy said, is an industrial relations issue. It is appropriate there should be further engagement. I do not know when the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, will formally bring a proposal to Cabinet, but there is Cabinet meeting on Thursday and one again next Tuesday, so I imagine it will be quite soon.

The proposals being made in the report provide for a 12.5% increase in the payment to student nurses and student midwives in their internship year and the continuation of the pandemic placement grant, recognising that the pandemic is ongoing. This may need to involve some back payments also.

It is worth pointing out the only healthcare students paid salaries are student nurses and midwives in their fourth year. They are paid between €21,000 and €22,000 on an annualised basis. During the 36-week internship in fourth year they are counted as point 5 full-time equivalent staff as they have not yet qualified.

In terms of recruitment in the round, it is worth acknowledging we have a budget of €22 billion. This is 50% higher than it was only six or seven years ago. On a *per capita* basis it is probably one of the highest in the world. The HSE has recruited 7,000 or 8,000 additional staff since the pandemic. It has authorisation to recruit a similar number again on top of this. It is doing a good job in recruiting as many staff as possible, notwithstanding the fact we face recruitment and retention challenges that are a feature of all health services.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I have been studying health for many years. It is the reason I got into politics. I do not think we realise what we are facing into over the coming months. I am not saying this in any political way but genuinely. I have never seen so many people, and I have family members who work in the healthcare area, who are so exhausted. They are facing into a perfect storm because of where we are with Covid. We do not know where we are fully going there. This winter will not be like last winter because we will have other issues such as the flu. It is a perfect storm. This year they are absolutely exhausted - completely exhausted. Last year we rallied but this year I am not sure whether rallying will be enough. The trolley watch figures given out by the INMO are so disturbing. University Hospital Limerick, UHL, is my nearest category 1 hospital and I have never seen the figures like these, with 75 people on trolleys. I have never heard the kind of stories I am hearing from University Hospital Kerry, and I know many people working in both hospitals.

Where is the winter plan? It was released last year in September; it is now November. The Tánaiste will obviously have a date for it in return to my question. We also know that the efficacy of the of Covid-19 vaccines is dropping and all international studies are showing that.

What are we doing on clean air quality? Ventilation is probably the issue that has been most underassessed and utilised as regards combating Covid-19 because it is an airborne disease. Do we have a regulatory proposal for the winter months regarding ventilation and clean air across all workplaces as people come back to work?

I welcome that the National Immunisation Advisory Council, NIAC, which did not meet for more than two weeks, incredibly, is finally allowing for booster shots for the 340,000 health-care workers. I presume it will be all health care workers, It will be done in about three weeks because we have the infrastructure in place. That was good planning.

There are, however, a number of other issues we need to deal with on top of that. I have said for a month now we need serial testing in nursing homes. There have been 12 outbreaks in the last week. We need to just learn from the past and not blame anyone. For a period over the winter months we need serial testing in nursing homes to protect our most vulnerable there.

I agree with the previous speaker on student nurses. This report should be with the student nursing unions before it is leaked to the media once again. It is scandalous that happened. There should be proper interaction so what is being proposed can be negotiated with them and can be told to their faces.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for his questions. Nobody knows for sure what we are going to face into this winter with the health service. Much of that will depend on the pandemic and on whether cases peak and fall, continue to rise, or level off at a certain point. Looking around Europe and at other parts of the world, it is hard to know for sure what trajectory we are going to follow. We will respond to it in a strategic and nimble way.

What is clear is that our health service, our hospitals and our primary care are going to be very busy this winter. They are busy every winter but this winter is going to be as busy as any we have seen in the past and perhaps more so and the system will be under pressure. That is because of three things: the impact of the pandemic, which is ongoing; regular health care needs which have not stopped; and a significant backlog of unmet health care need because certain services were curtailed or shut altogether in the early stages of the pandemic.

We are doing a number of things. Phenomenal additional resources - €22 billion - are being spent this year in the health service. That extra €4 billion that the health service had in a previous year is being retained. The health service is receiving more funding in 2022 than many Opposition parties even called for. There are an extra 850 beds in the system, above where we were when the pandemic began, and more can be added. There is additional intensive care unit, ICU capacity and more funding for community care, home care, general practice and for the use of private hospitals, as appropriate and as needed, under the existing agreement. These are all the tools we can use at the moment to manage the situation.

The second aspect is the vaccine booster programme, beginning this week for all of those between 60 and 80 and is already under way for people under 60 who are immunocompromised. The next group that has been approved is healthcare workers, and I believe this can be done very swiftly. I welcome NIAC's decision in that regard. NIAC will next consider people under 60 who have chronic conditions and who may well also need the booster shot. There is very good evidence from other jurisdictions, including Israel, the country first vaccinated and first boosted, that the booster shots are very effective. We are going to see an extensive booster programme and all of us in this House have called for that.

On ventilation, there is advice in the Work Safely Protocol which is agreed between Government, unions and employers, and that is updated regularly. Serial testing in nursing homes and the extension of antigen testing to schools are under review by NPHE.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The 60- to 69-year-olds are a group I have raised many times in the House in regard to the length of time they had to wait for their second vaccine. They now have to wait another five to six months to get their boosters because they were in the category that received AstraZeneca. What comfort can the Tánaiste give people in that category, as everyone else gets boosters over the next three weeks, regarding the efficacy of their vaccines and how the boosters that are given to them will not discriminate because of their being in that category?

Second, I am all for COVAX and distributing some of our vaccines to poorer nations across the world, particularly the vector vaccines. However, the mRNA vaccines are not really distributable to poorer nations because they do not have the infrastructure. Will consideration be given by early next year, after we have dealt with those aged under 60 who have underlying conditions, to putting in place a booster vaccine programme for the whole population? We have the infrastructure to do it and we have 90 million vaccines, some of which we will not be distributing under COVAX. We will have more than ample vaccines to do so.

The Tánaiste: At the outset, it is really important to say that all four of the vaccines that have been used in Ireland are very effective, perhaps not as effective against transmission as we hoped but extremely effective in reducing hospitalisation and the need for ICU care and against death. What is remarkable is that, in the past two weeks or so, we have had as many cases of Covid detected as we did in the first six months of the pandemic, yet we have not seen comparable numbers, thankfully, in our hospitals and ICUs, let alone deaths. It is because of the strength and efficacy of those vaccines that we are in a much better position relatively than we would be had we not had those vaccines, and a much better position than we were in last winter or last year.

The advice and decision from NIAC, as adopted by the Government, is that anybody receiving a booster shot will receive an mRNA vaccine, that is Pfizer, Moderna or the new one that will be approved quite soon. However, my understanding is that people cannot receive a booster shot until five to six months after their previous shot. I will double-check that for the Deputy. I believe we are going to need an extensive vaccination programme. We have now got approval for the over-60s, healthcare workers and people under 60 who are immunocompromised. I think we will need approval, and we will be seeking advice and approval from NIAC, on extending the vaccine booster programme more widely, particularly to those under 60 with chronic conditions. I know NIAC and NPHE are examining the evidence on that all the time.

An Ceann Comhairle: The next speaker is Deputy Pringle, on behalf of the Independent Group.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I want to raise a very serious case of abuse and neglect by the HSE at Ard Gréine Court in Ballybofey, and the delay in publishing the Brandon report, which outlines what was not done to protect the residents there. The report highlights catastrophic failures of the most vulnerable people by our health services. There is a catalogue of abuse and neglect. The report identifies limited reports of abuse and inappropriate sexual behaviour from 1991 and concentrates on the period between 2003 and 2016. In 2011, management reported the issue to the Garda, as did the whistleblower. In the same year, after the report to the Garda and HIQA by the whistleblower, the individual identified as “Brandon” was isolated within the

centre and the abuse stopped. In 2013, because of financial constraints - that needs to be re-stated; it was done because of financial constraints - Brandon was moved back into the general population within the centre. The abuse started again and only stopped when Brandon was moved to a nursing home in 2016.

The HSE, the Garda and HIQA all have questions to answer in regard to how they did not respond to the needs of residents. The HSE has constantly moved to delay the publishing of the report. First, it was to preserve the identity of people. Then we were treated to the news of a Garda investigation on the day the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, met with families in Donegal to explain to them what was happening. Now we hear there are no charges in regard to the investigation but, apparently, the HSE is still delaying the report, saying it does not reflect what it did. If it wants to put on record what was done, why not publish its own report? Unfortunately, I would say it would be a very interesting but short read. We see in today's *The Irish Times* that HIQA has admitted that it was aware of the sexual assaults, but it did not call that out in its reports in March and May of 2016 even though it saw it on the files in the centre. The Taoiseach has said previously that he wants to see the Brandon report published. The catastrophic failures by the HSE to deal with the issues, by HIQA to highlight them and by the Garda to deal with complaints have left families with half-truths and without the full story of what happened to their loved ones.

It is time to respect the existence of those without a voice, who the State was supposed to protect and defend. Will the Tánaiste call today for the Brandon report to be published and add the strength of the Dáil to the calls for publication of the report? Also, how can we be sure that there are no other Brandon-type reports gathering dust in HSE headquarters which we do not know about?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Pringle for raising this issue and acknowledge his advocacy on this very sensitive matter. Anybody who has read or listened to reports on this issue will have been shocked and very upset at what happened and will struggle to understand how something like this could happen. When I heard about it, I was shocked and appalled that anything like this could happen anywhere at any point in time under any model of care, and for so long. My thoughts in the first instance are with the individuals and families affected. None of us can begin to imagine what they have been put through.

The HSE commissioned the national independent review panel to carry out a review of abuse allegations at a HSE-provided residential service for adults with a disability. The purpose was to review the governance arrangements in the facility and to understand why the situation had continued over a period of years without any effective action being taken by management during Brandon's residency to stop and prevent these assaults. The report identified 108 occurrences of sexually inappropriate behaviours by one resident, referred to by the pseudonym "Brandon", towards 18 other residents of the facility over an eight-year period between 2003 and 2011. The report notes that these incidents occurred with the knowledge of some staff and management of the facility at that time. It was eventually brought to light by the actions of an individual who approached a public representative in October 2016, who, in turn, brought it to the attention of the general manager of the county's disability services.

The safety and protection of vulnerable people in the care of the State are paramount, and the Government's first concern is to ensure that the needs of the current service users are being prioritised. The HSE has assured the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, that there is no ongoing risk and that the national governance and accountability structures to oversee the implemen-

tation of the recommendations arising from the report are in place. The HSE board has also advised that its focus is on ensuring that all the recommendations of the report are promptly acted on by the HSE.

With regard to publication of the report, An Garda Síochána has asked the HSE to withhold publication for the time being while it considers the findings. The HSE has indicated that it will publish the findings once it has received clearance to do so. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, will engage with the HSE board on this in the days and weeks ahead. The Minister of State has also written to the Garda Commissioner about the publication of the report. The Government and I support her in this regard and believe that it should be published as soon as possible and without further delay.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Tánaiste for his response. I pay tribute to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, for the work she has done on this and on trying to get the HSE to own up and publish the report. That is vital because how can we be certain that the HSE is implementing changes that could prevent this happening somewhere else? Also, how can we be certain that it has not already happened somewhere else? At this stage, unfortunately, I have no faith in the HSE to deal with this issue. If I had not raised this with the previous Minister of State with responsibility for disabilities at the time, this would have been buried already within the HSE. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has put pressure on the HSE, as a result of pressure I have put on her. She has taken it on and worked very hard to make sure this would happen. It must happen because we need to be confident that this will not happen again. That is the reality. The families have said this and are very strong on this matter. They need to know what happened. It is about making sure that it does not happen again. That is the important thing.

I urge the Tánaiste to push for this to be published, and to push the Garda to say it is not interested and that it is not going to go any further on this. It is very interesting that it is only taking an interest now. This must be published and we need people to take it into account and make it work.

The Tánaiste: We will certainly do that. The Government will press the HSE and the Garda to have this report published. It needs to be published for two reasons. The families concerned have a right to information and a right to know what happened, who knew what at what point, and how they acted. Anyone involved in this, including some of the staff members - some may have a case to answer and others may be entirely innocent - also have a right to know what is in this report. As the Deputy rightly points out, it is essential that we see the report so that we can be assured that something like this will not happen again. It is hard to contemplate how it went on for over eight years with more than 100 sexual assaults and happened with the knowledge of some of the management and staff. It is hard to comprehend how that could be the case for so long.

As the Deputy acknowledged, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has been very active on this issue. Once she became aware of it, she has been very engaged. On Friday, 15 October she met the families who wished to meet her. She has indicated that the focus must now be on ensuring the findings and recommendations of the report are appropriately dealt with.

Deputy Michael Collins: The recent budget slashed €88 million off the allocation for regional and rural roads. These local and regional roads are the arteries that connect many parts of the country and are highly trafficked routes. These roads represent 96,000 km of the total

101,000 km of our public road network in Ireland, carrying over 54% of the traffic, but have remained chronically underfunded since the financial crash. Poor quality roads can be a major cause of concern to communities, directly impacting economic development in our regions and rural areas. Ongoing underinvestment in these roads has now created a potential crisis, which the Government conveniently chooses to ignore.

Analysis done by the Department of Transport under the Strategic Framework for Investment in Land Transport, which was published in 2015 and updated in 2019, conservatively estimated that investment of at least €630 million per annum was needed to maintain the regional and local road networks in a steady-state condition. This means that without this minimal investment our road network will continue to deteriorate each year.

My constituency of Cork South-West has one of the worst road networks in the country, according to an independent report by the All Island Research Observatory, AIRO, which was carried out by Maynooth University and commissioned by Cork County Council. It stated that €750 million was needed to bring the roads in County Cork alone up to the standards set out by Engineers Ireland. It also stated that under current Government funding for County Cork roads alone, it will take 52 years to bring our roads up to the standards set in other counties. This report was carried out last year before the Government slashed the roads budget this year.

The National Oversight and Audit Commission 2020 report states that a staggering 33% of local primary roads require urgent structural defect rehabilitation, with 23% of the county's regional road networks being in a similar shocking condition. According to the AIRO report, County Cork has the highest level of structurally unsound roads in the State. This should have warranted a major investment in regional roads in the 2022 budget rather than the cuts announced. Despite this stark warning and many years of serious underfunding for roads since the financial crisis, only €561 million has been allocated for local and regional roads in 2022. This application represents a deep cut of €23 million from the 2021 allocation and is at least €70 million below what is needed just to maintain the existing network.

Additionally, the national roads budget has been reduced by €65 million for 2022. Taken together this means an enormous €88 million or 7% cut, meaning any new capital investment projects are off the table. When the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, kicked ball around Páirc Uí Chaoimh recently before they announced funding for roads for decades to come, were they aware of this independent report carried out by AIRO on behalf of Cork County Council indicating serious under-resourcing of our roads in west Cork? If so, why was no plan announced for any of our urgent road projects in west Cork?

The Tánaiste: I am not sure those figures for the transport budget and the budget for roads in 2022 are correct. I will need to go back to office later and check on them. As far as I am aware, we have found additional funding for the remainder of this year for local and regional roads. That is coming from the Department of Transport budget, which will not be fully spent this year and will need to be carried over in part into next year. We also found additional funding for the local improvement scheme for laneways and rural roads in particular. That is coming through from the Department led by the Minister, Deputy Heather Humphreys. We must maintain that funding in the years ahead, given the long list of projects that are still awaiting funding.

As the Deputy acknowledges, we have many roads in Ireland relative to our population and much of that is down to our settlement patterns, which are quite dispersed and not as concen-

trated as they might be in other countries. That makes them particularly difficult to maintain, but we should maintain them because motorists also pay much tax, whether it is motor tax, vehicle registration tax or the tax on diesel or petrol. Much of that should be used to maintain and improve our roads.

Local authorities can help as well and no local authority should consider itself entirely dependent on central government for funding for roads. They have the capacity to use money from the local property tax and commercial rates to improve their roads and it is appropriate that they should do so. Some money should come from central government but there should also be money coming from local resources. It is important that the two of these elements happen rather than just one.

On the question of roads programmes in the round, the national development plan, as referenced by the Deputy, provides for a 2:1 split on spending on new transport projects, with two thirds spent on public transport and one third spent on new roads. In the past year, we have seen some significant new road projects go to construction. For example, we have the next phase at Dunkettle, outside Cork city, which the Deputy knows well, and the Moycullen bypass just west of Galway city, which many people here also know well. There is also the Moyross road outside Limerick city and the Turlough to Scramogue road, which is an upgrade of the N5. Despite claims to the contrary, in the past year alone five major road projects have been signed off by the Department of Transport and its Minister. We expect to see further road projects being signed off in the year ahead.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. The budget slashed €88 million from regional and rural roads for the coming year. Every time the Tánaiste and his colleagues make announcements on roads, west Cork is always omitted. I remind the Tánaiste that we pay motor tax down there too. He should not think we are going around without taxing our vehicles in west Cork. The funds should come back there as they do everywhere else.

I asked the Tánaiste a question a while ago. Before he, the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, sat down and approved the recent announcement of massive funding, had they read the AIRO report? This was an independent report initiated by Cork County Council. It is vital that the Tánaiste give a straight answer on this. If they had read the report, it would have made for stark reading.

When they announced their plans for Ireland at Páirc Uí Chaoimh recently, did they include the completion of the Bandon southern relief road, which has been awaited and promised for decades but not delivered? Did they announce plans for a full northern relief road for Bandon so the town can thrive as a business location? Did they give the green light for the Innishannon and Bantry bypasses or funding for long-awaited passing bays on the N71, the Bandon-Clonakilty-Skibbreen road, or the R586, the Ballineen-Dunmanway-Drimoleague road? I did not hear any announcement for these roads but if I am wrong, will the Taoiseach tell me or the country when one or all of these projects for west Cork will start?

The Tánaiste: I appreciate that these are important questions and these are important projects for people living in west Cork but that question is probably best put to the Minister for Transport rather than me, as he would have the up-to-date information. I will certainly let him know the Deputy raised this question today in the Dáil.

I am very aware of the strategic framework for land transport investment report as it was

commissioned some time ago, when I was the Minister with responsibility for transport. I am familiar with it and have read it.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: For the information of the House, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill has been nominated to the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: It has been agreed that for the duration of the Covid-19 crisis, the rapporteur's report will be taken as read. Are the proposed arrangements for business this week agreed to?

Deputy Michael Collins: They are not agreed. I would like us to set some time aside this week to discuss climate action and the difference in the opinions of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach on the culling of cattle in this country and the effect this will have on rural Ireland and agriculture, particularly dairy and suckler herds. The experts on the quango special advisory council put in place by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, are making it clear there will be a cull of cattle in this country. The Minister is totally delusional and continues to be in denial about this. We must have proper and full debate in the House on this as there is concern that 50,000 jobs will be in jeopardy. People with suckler and dairy herds in this country are worried about what the outcome will be.

An Ceann Comhairle: Do any other Members wish to contribute on the Order of Business?

The Tánaiste: We are happy to have a debate on that matter. It would obviously have to be scheduled by the Business Committee. We are happy to have a debate on climate issues and the impact on agriculture and other sectors. If it cannot be accommodated this week, it will be next week when Members will have the benefit of considering the Government's climate action plan. Let me be clear: there will not be any cull of the herd. That is not a proposal in the climate action plan.

Deputy Michael Collins: It goes against the advice of the council.

The Tánaiste: We anticipate herd stabilisation over the next number of years. Some farmers may increase the number of animals they keep, while others may decrease the numbers because they decide to diversify into other areas such as planting trees, engaging with carbon farming and so on. We expect, in the round, to see herd stabilisation with the national herd staying at roughly the same size as it is at now. A 10% reduction - not 30% - in bovine methane can be achieved over a ten-year period. Let there be no doubt that the Government believes that Ireland without its beef industry would not be Ireland. Ireland without its dairy sector would not be Ireland. We are proud of the fact that we are able to produce nine times as much food as we need and we will continue doing that.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: On a point of clarification.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, you can only have one opportunity to speak.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is on a point of clarification. The Tánaiste keeps using the words “stabilising the national herd”.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not a point of clarification.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Will he please stop using misleading language? That is like “reconfiguration of the health service”. It is outrageous and he is coddling the farmers of Ireland by coming out with that type of statement. Stabilisation means a cut. I ask the Tánaiste to call it what it is.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Deputy is correct.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: He should use plain language and not gobbledygook.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will use plain language now. The Deputy is out of order. Does anyone else wish to speak on the Order of Business? If not, I will take it that the proposed arrangements for the week’s business is agreed to, insofar as the Tánaiste has accepted there will be a debate on this matter in the near future. Is that agreed?

Deputy Michael Collins: It is not agreed. I would like a proper debate on this.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Oral questions will include climate change.

An Ceann Comhairle: In addition, Deputy Holly Cairns has had a Topical Issue matter selected on the same issue.

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 25; Níl, 20; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>O’Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	

<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Ó Riordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Jack Chambers and Brendan Griffin; Níl, Deputies Michael Collins and Danny Healy-Rae.

Question declared carried.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy David Cullinane: According to media reports this morning, thousands of households across the State are set to be hit with a rise in the cost of bin collections and TV packages along with more energy price increases. The Tánaiste will be aware that inflation is now running at greater than 5% and is likely to continue upwards next year. We also know that energy poverty is becoming a growing problem across the State. Energy prices are soaring. We will see a further increase in the carbon tax, which will increase fuel costs even more. It has been reported that households will face bills of an additional €400 this winter. In budget 2022, the Government announced a bare minimum increase to the fuel allowance income threshold of €20, which will reach only a limited number of households. What will the Tánaiste and the Government do in the coming months to address these soaring costs and the cost of living crisis so many workers and families face?

The Tánaiste: The Government acknowledges that the cost of living is rising and that a lot of bills have increased in the past few weeks and months and may rise again into the new year. The Deputy will acknowledge that many of these cost increases are driven by international factors, not Government decisions, and involve prices set by commercial entities rather than the Government. The Government provided in the budget for an increase in the fuel allowance, extending it to more people, increases in welfare and pension payments, which kick in from 1 January, and decreases in income tax and personal taxation for middle-income people in particular, something not supported by Sinn Féin. The average middle-income couple will be €800 better off in cash terms, paying less tax, than would be the case under Sinn Féin's proposals. We have provided for other measures that will help families, such as the increase in the Stu-

dent Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant next year and reductions in the cost of medicines. Those are the kinds of things we are doing, but we acknowledge that, while they will help with the rising cost of living, they may not be enough to fully compensate families for it.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Because of Article 41 of our Constitution, the only fully legally recognised family is that created through marriage. We know that does not reflect the reality of modern Ireland, in which there are more than 150,000 cohabiting couples. To recognise the modern family unit fully, we need a change in the Constitution. Furthermore, the Tánaiste will be aware, since I have raised the case here on numerous occasions, of Johnny O'Meara from Tipperary, whose partner Michelle died and whose family was left without any entitlement to a widow's contributory pension.

3 o'clock

The family unit has changed. In fairness, the Tánaiste has taken an interest in this issue, and I have raised the matter in the past.

Will the Tánaiste ensure amendments are brought to the upcoming social welfare Bill that will ensure cohabiting couples are made eligible for a contributory survivor's pension? Will he give a timeline for a referendum to deliver on the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly? We would like Article 41 of the Constitution amended to reflect the UN definition of the family.

The Tánaiste: I am afraid I cannot make a commitment on that on the floor of the House right now, but I know it is being examined by the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee. I will let the Ministers know that the matter has been raised here and I will ask that a more detailed response is sent to the Deputy.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The figures from the Residential Tenancies Board show that rent caps have been breached in every county in Ireland where they have been introduced. Figures given to me by the Residential Tenancies Board also confirm that sanctions against landlords for breaching rent caps have only been applied in about 10% of the cases investigated. Clearly, rent caps are not working. It is not just the Opposition Deputies who are saying this. Deputy Willie O'Dea, a Government back bench Deputy, has called for an end to ineffective tweaks on rent caps and for a complete ban on rent increases. Does the Tánaiste agree with this call for a complete ban on rent increases? Will the Government bring that in?

The Tánaiste: Rent caps or rent freezes of any nature are not going to work if they are not enforced. This is acknowledged by the Government. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien has spoken on this in recent weeks and is working on proposals.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is just under a year since People Before Profit brought the first motion to this Dáil calling for student nurses and student midwives to be paid while they are working on placement. Today, they are still out there protesting and demanding they be paid and respected for the work they do during placement. I understand the Tánaiste said earlier there will be a slight increase for final year students and a continuation, just for the period of the pandemic, of the pretty miserable and insulting €100 per week. Does the Tánaiste not understand that the majority of those student nurses and midwives are planning or considering leaving this country, and this is repeated outside by all of the students when you talk to them, because of the lack of respect and reward they get while they are students, including the difficulties with fees, the cost of subsistence, travel and accommodation, and the inability to work while they are on placement? This is not just a Covid issue. We need to pay our student nurses

and midwives and support them if we are going to keep them in the public health service after they qualify.

The Tánaiste: As somebody who worked in the public health service for seven years, as somebody who represents a constituency just like the Deputy does, and as somebody who has friends and family working in the health service, I very much understand the recruitment and retention challenges the Irish health services face. I understand such challenges are far from unique to Ireland. It is a problem faced by almost every health service in the developed world. Nonetheless, we are making important progress. The HSE was able to add an additional 7,000 to 8,000 staff in the past year and has authorisation to add another 7,000 or 8,000 staff. We have more doctors employed by the HSE than ever was the case before, both consultants and non-consultant hospital doctors. We have been increasing our midwife and nurse numbers in recent years, which is extremely welcome.

What can we do about it? The pay increases happening right across the public service can help. Reductions in income tax, which the Deputy does not support, have the same effect in people's take home pay and help to reduce the cost of living. The Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, will be making an announcement about the increase in the payment for student nurse and midwife interns.

Deputy Michael Lowry: The educational needs of their children are taken very seriously by every parent, and particularly so when a child has additional needs. Across Tipperary and the country, numerous children are in their final year in autism units of primary schools. Secondary school enrolments are under way. Autism units in secondary schools should be structured to be capable of accepting all pupils who are making the transition up from primary schools. Parents want their autistic children to transfer to secondary schools that provide for their educational needs while incorporating the familiarity and security of the friends they have made in primary school. There is an abject failure by the State to provide sufficient places for autistic children when they graduate from primary to secondary schools. The lack of spaces is a cause of considerable confusion and distress among these children and their parents. I ask the Government to recognise that the current system is failing autistic children. We need to fill this gaping gap in our secondary school system as a matter of urgency.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I thank Deputy Lowry for his question. Obviously, as Minister responsible for special education, I take the matter very seriously. We must always have an adequate number of places in special classes. The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, is tasked, through its special educational needs organisers, SENOs, with working with schools on the ground to make sure every child with additional needs can make the transition from primary school to post-primary school. If we consider the progress we have made since 2011, we note we have increased the number of special class places by 386%, from 584 to 2,118. This year alone, we opened 269 special classes, 74 of which were for autism spectrum disorder, ASD, pupils at post-primary level. Next year, we will be opening 287 special classes, 101 of which will be for post-primary level. We have continued to work with the NCSE and the Department, including through the SENOs. There is always support available so if the Deputy is aware of families in need of it, he should make sure they notify the Department or let me know about them, or they can engage with the National Council for Special Education.

Deputy Michael Collins: There is a huge backlog of passports waiting to be processed and printed. I have heard from people all over my constituency who have had their travel plans de-

stroyed recently. We, as Oireachtas Members, were given a telephone number the week before last so we could have direct contact with the Passport Office. Yesterday, my office was open at 9 a.m. and by 11.30 a.m. we had five calls about passports made. We were then told we could make no further calls until next week. I do not know who came up with the number five but it is not good enough by a long shot. I know of a lady waiting on her baby's passport. She has worked as a scientist on Covid-19 research since the very start of the pandemic. She was told she may get her passport in December. I have encountered the case of a lady who is supposed to get on a flight on Saturday morning but, alas, she has no passport. There is another lady who had to cancel her plans to fly with her daughter last weekend. I could go on and on. What is the Government going to do to address the backlog and give Members of the Oireachtas access to passport offices immediately?

The Tánaiste: I acknowledge the difficulties we have had and the delays people have experienced in getting a new passport or having their passport renewed. I am sure we all have had an unprecedented number of queries in our constituency offices about this. I certainly have. It is related to issues concerning the pandemic in that a backlog built up. Also, the staff are not fully back in the passport offices. This is a matter on which the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, is working and on which he will try to make progress in the next little while.

Deputy Marian Harkin: As it stands, it is the intention of the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, to grant prospecting licences for base metals, silver and gold in respect of certain townlands in Leitrim. While I am aware of the difference between prospecting licences and mining licences, the simple fact is local communities do not want mining companies to get their foot in the door. They do not want carbon-heavy extractive industries, such as the mining industry, because they are not sustainable or appropriate for their county. Just yesterday, Leitrim County Council voted unanimously to call on the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications not to proceed with the issuing of a licence for several locations in Leitrim. I ask the Tánaiste to intervene with the Minister and ensure Government policy will not support the issuing of these licences.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I am afraid I am not across the detail of it but it came up in conversation with the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, and others when I had the opportunity to visit both Sligo and Leitrim quite recently. I expect to see the Minister, Deputy Ryan, on Thursday, if not tomorrow, and I will let him know the Deputy raised the matter today and ask him to contact her directly.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Is the Tánaiste aware of the difficulties being experienced by several sports organisations as a result of the rule that, to participate in indoor sport, people must be vaccinated? The Minister will be aware it is not possible for people under the age of 12 to be vaccinated. There are some indoor sports, such as basketball, where a considerable percentage of the participants are under that age. Does the Government intend to revisit that decision or, at least, publish clear guidelines for how it will operate and indicate the scientific information that underpins the decision?

The Tánaiste: I will certainly look into the issue and come back to the Deputy on it. My understanding is that an unlimited number of people can engage in indoor sports if they are fully vaccinated, while if they are not fully vaccinated it has to be done in pods, but this does not apply to children under 12. I will check that out and revert to the Deputy with a more detailed reply.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I thank the Tánaiste for clarifying the approach that will be taken in respect of farming in the climate action plan. Measures to improve the environmental impact of agriculture are not an attack on farming, as some people would seek to portray them, but rather are about farming better. I draw the attention of the House and the Tánaiste to the smart farming programme. It is a co-operative programme between the Irish Farmers Association and the Environmental Protection Agency through which, in a common effort, they are delivering for farmers cost savings of €5,600 and a cut in climate impact of 9%. That is the way forward. It is about coming up with practical ways of dealing with the challenge. This is an exporting country and we need to be conscious of the way consumers will view our products in the future. We must act to protect livelihoods.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is absolutely correct. It is in our interest as a food-producing country, as well as being in the interests of Irish farmers and the food industry, to embrace the climate and sustainability agenda, and I know very many, if not the vast majority, want to do exactly that. As things change in the coming couple of decades, banks and financial institutions will only lend money to businesses and firms they think are scoring well in terms of climate and sustainability, and consumers increasingly will want to know about the products they are buying and whether those products contributed to the pollution of rivers or to climate change. That is why it makes sense as a food-producing nation that we get on the right side of history in this regard. The comments of the Deputy in that respect are absolutely correct. What we need to do as a Government and a society is work with farmers and bring them and the food industry with us, and that is what we intend to do.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I wish to raise the issue of the updated guidance on games issued by Sport Ireland on 28 October. Last weekend alone, these guidelines created severe issues for volunteers in basketball and other indoor sports. The volunteers have been placed in the very difficult position of having to tell children they are not allowed to participate in indoor matches due to not being fully vaccinated. These people are volunteers and significant pressure is being put on them. They are having to turn young players away. At present, there is a lack of representation of any indoor sports national governing body on the Sport Ireland expert group and that needs to be addressed. Clarity must be given in respect of why mixed-immunity children can play indoor sports together in school but not outside the school in their local club. Will the Tánaiste give clarity on that issue and consider providing for representation of indoor sports on the expert group?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. Deputy O’Dea raised this issue earlier. I will follow up on it. It has come up in my conversations with constituents too. We do need to get clarity. My understanding is the restriction does not apply to those under 12 and that unvaccinated people or those with mixed vaccination status can train in pods. I acknowledge that may not always be practical, particularly for a sport such as basketball, but I will look into it and come back to both Deputies with a better reply.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Tánaiste for recently confirming in reply to a parliamentary question I tabled that IDA Ireland will build a second advance facility in Tralee. That is very welcome. It follows on from the first advance facility which was built by IDA Ireland several years ago. It now houses Central Pharma and will become operational in the first quarter of the new year. This is an issue on which I am working hard with Councillor Jim Finucane in Tralee. He, too, is passionate about it. He raised it at a meeting of Kerry County Council on Monday and pointed out there are many suitable vacant sites in the technology park. I brought the Minister of State, Deputy English, there last week to show him the vacant sites. It is very

important the Tánaiste pushes to make this happen as soon as possible. We know Central Pharma will provide numerous jobs for Tralee and Kerry. Another advance facility could provide hundreds of jobs for Tralee and Kerry and would be vital to the economy, but we need to see it happening as soon as possible. I welcome the progress made to date.

The Tánaiste: IDA Ireland is committed to building a second new advance technology building in Tralee. I know both Deputy Griffin and Councillor Jim Finucane have been working on the matter for quite some time. The site selection process is under way. Securing planning permission and the construction of the building will be the next step after that. It is intended the facility will be built during the lifetime of the current IDA Ireland strategy, that is, not later than 2024. The advance technology building might be used either as a new office development or an industrial investment, given the flexible nature of the kind of building solutions IDA Ireland does. The intention is to use this building solution to secure a foreign direct investment for Tralee that will create hundreds of new jobs for the town and the region.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I wish to ask the Tánaiste about comments by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, on the possibility of the power stations at Shannonbridge and Lanesborough playing a role in generating emergency electricity in the coming years. This begs the question, given the national grid was already struggling last year, of whether consideration was given to the impact on energy supply of shutting down the Shannonbridge and Lanesborough power stations. The Tánaiste will be aware workers in counties such as Roscommon and Galway lost their livelihoods overnight. Those jobs have not been replaced. They and their communities really feel like they are collateral damage in the move from brown energy to green energy. To add insult to injury, peat production in Ireland has been stopped but peat is now being imported at record levels, with almost 40,000 tonnes, to the value of €6.7 million, having been imported in just the first seven months of this year.

Will the Tánaiste explain to workers who have been laid off in Shannonbridge and Lanesborough why it was necessary to shut down peat-fired power stations almost overnight but tens of thousands of tonnes of peat are now being imported? Will he tell those workers how much emissions are being saved by transporting peat thousands of miles rather than just down the road?

The Tánaiste: The power stations at Lanesborough and Shannonbridge were not closed as a consequence of a Government decision. It is important to emphasise that. I know the Deputy is aware of it already. These were decisions by An Bord Pleanála and the courts. What the ESB wanted to do and what the Government wanted it to do was to convert those stations to biomass, such that they would use a mix of peat and biomass and then biomass into the future, which would be a dispatchable form of renewable energy but, unfortunately, for environmental reasons that was shot down by An Bord Pleanála and that is why it did not proceed. People can argue about whether that was the right decision, but it is the decision that was made and it was definitely not a decision of the Government.

I spoke to the new chief executive officer of the ESB yesterday, especially about Lanesborough because I visited Longford last week. The ESB is considering several options for the Lanesborough site, one of which involves using it as a battery electricity plant. One of the things that can now be done in the context of wind energy is that surplus wind produced on the grid can then be stored in batteries and then dispatched as needed. That is one of the options being considered for Lanesborough. It would be a new generation power station, if you like.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: This morning, Irish Families Through Surrogacy gave me a letter to give to the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health seeking support for urgent legislation on international surrogacy. I have met, outside the gates of Leinster House and previously, families from Carlow and Kilkenny impacted by this issue and I support them. There are reports the Government will delay the assisted human reproduction Bill because of technical legal issues. Will this legislation recognise and allow for international and compensated surrogacy which is guided by best practice? I would appreciate knowing the expected timeline for the publication of the Bill. Enactment of this legislation is committed to in the programme for Government. The Bill must be published as a matter of urgency to give legal recognition to children born through surrogacy and to their families. I hope the Tánaiste will support these families and hear their concerns on the urgency and particulars of this legislation.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I acknowledge that legislation on assisted human reproduction and international surrogacy is long overdue. Many Members have been lobbied in respect of this issue in recent weeks. It is complex. There are complex legal and ethical questions that arise in respect of for-profit surrogacy services, children being moved from other countries to this country and the right to know who one's biological parents are. There are many very complicated ethical issues that have to be resolved, particularly in the context of our difficult history in respect of adoption and women giving up their children and so on. We must get this right. There has been substantial work done and engagement on this issue since the formation of the Government, involving the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, the Minister for Health, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Attorney General. In the coming weeks a memorandum will be brought to Cabinet proposing how to consider the issues relating to international surrogacy and how subsequently to introduce any legislative change. It will be a joint memorandum from the Departments of Justice; Health; and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. It will propose the establishment of a time-limited special joint Oireachtas committee to consider the issue, including the issues arising from commercial international surrogacy, and to report with recommendations.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: A father told me today that his 12-year-old, 14-year-old and 16-year-old children have been banned from playing basketball because they have no vaccine pass. A volleyball coach in County Mayo was told not to accept girls between the ages of 12 and 17 if they do not have a vaccine pass. A kickboxing coach was also told not to accept children for the same reasons. A young girl was stopped from going on a school trip because she had no vaccine pass.

First of all, discrimination is wrong. Second, it makes no sense. Transmission of Covid-19 is happening between people who are vaccinated. If the Government wants to stop transmission, antigen testing is the way to do it. It also does not have the effect of discriminating against people. Children have suffered so much during the Covid pandemic. Their education has been hammered and their social development has been radically arrested over the last year. It is incredible that they are now facing being othered, segregated and banned from doing things that are good for their physical and mental health. It is wrong, cruel and useless. Will the Tánaiste reverse it?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. It is important to say at the outset that the vaccines do reduce transmission. They do not eliminate it, but they do reduce it. It is one of the reasons why it is in people's interest to get vaccinated. It will reduce the risk of them transmitting the virus to other people, as well as considerably reducing the risk of them being hospitalised,

needing intensive care or dying as a consequence of contracting the virus. Obviously, these are decisions that individuals have to make and parents have to make with respect to their children.

In relation to the issue of indoor sports, it has been raised a couple of times. A number of Deputies raised it earlier. I have committed to seeking a further examination of the regulations. My understanding is that if there is a mixed group of children, some of whom are vaccinated and some are not, it is possible for them to train and do activities in pods. As I said, I will follow up on the issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are going to run out of time, so I will take Deputies McAuliffe and Ryan. They have 30 seconds each.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: This morning, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage completed the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Local Government (Directly Elected Mayor with Executive Functions in Limerick City & County) Bill 2021. It was clear that that legislation would be utterly unsuitable for the Dublin area. Yet, Dublin has been promised a directly elected mayor in the programme for Government.

Can the Tánaiste say when the Government might bring forward either legislation or a convention with a view to getting consensus on the issue? There are many aspects of cultural, social and business life in Dublin that need stronger local government. Housing is one example of an area where the Government has given all of the powers to local authorities, yet I do not see the ambition at local authority level to deliver.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: On page 12 of the programme for Government, a commitment is made to introduce new measures of well-being and progress. It states: “existing measures of economic performance fail to measure matters such as damage to the environment and voluntary work...equality of opportunity, distribution of wealth and income...” What progress has been made with this? Will the Government commit to monitoring and improving the Gini coefficient, which measures the distribution of wealth?

The Tánaiste: A lot of work is underway on the issue of the well-being index. I will ensure that Deputy Ryan receives an update on that. The Gini co-efficient, which is a measure of income inequality, is produced every year by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, with the survey on income and living conditions. Despite a lot of claims to the contrary and a lot of misinformation, in Ireland as a country, almost unusually in the western world, income inequality has narrowed in recent years. We are much more equal than many other countries that we compare ourselves to. We have seen falling inequality in recent years, not increasing inequality, as least as measured by the Gini co-efficient.

In relation to Deputy McAuliffe’s question on the Dublin mayor and Dublin local government, the next citizens’ assembly on the list will examine the issue of government in Dublin, because we have an unusual arrangement with the four local authorities and four mayors. It is next on the list to have a citizens’ assembly on the issue. We are keen to ensure that happens next year with a view to being able to put proposals to the people of all four Dublin local authorities in a plebiscite on the same day as the local and European elections in 2024.

Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2021: Referral to Joint Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I move:

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

Sectoral Employment Order(Construction Sector) 2021,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 20th October, 2021, be referred to the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment, in accordance with Standing Order 95(5), which, not later than 16th November, 2021, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 101, and Standing Order 100(2) shall accordingly apply.”

Question put and agreed to.

Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2021: Referral to Joint Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I move:

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2021,

copies of which were laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 20th October, 2021, be referred to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, in accordance with Standing Order 95(5), which,not later than 30th November, 2021, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 101, and Standing Order 100(2) shall accordingly apply.”

Question put and agreed to.

Approval of EU Regulation 2021/693: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to accept the following measure:

Regulation (EU) 2021/693 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28th April, 2021, establishing the Justice Programme and repealing Regulation (EU) No. 1382/2013,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 17th June, 2021.”

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer, following those next set down to the Minister for Finance, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 30th July, 2020, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Foreign Affairs.”

Question put and agreed to.

Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Authorisation to Instruct Legal Representatives: Motion

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I move:

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to section 4(2)(f)(iv) of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Acts 2003 to 2018, hereby authorises the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission to defend Workplace Relations Commission proceedings against a member of Dáil Éireann entitled: ADJ-00032962, and which proceedings arise solely out of the performance by the member concerned of their parliamentary functions as a member of Dáil Éireann.”

Question put and agreed to.

Extension of Part 3 of the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020: Motion

An Ceann Comhairle: As agreed on the Order of Business today, the motion on the extension of Part 3 of the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020, the motion on the extension of the Health (Amendment) Act 2020, and the motion on the extension of the Criminal Justice (Enforcement Powers) (Covid-19) Act 2020 will be debated together. However, the motions are only being debated together; they are

not being moved together. Therefore, they are not being decided by one question. Accordingly, in accordance with the order of the Dáil today, when the Minister for Health opens the debate he will move the first motion, but will speak to all three motions, as will all other Deputies.

At the conclusion of the debate, the three motions and amendments thereto will all be decided separately.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I move:

That Dáil Éireann resolves that the amendments effected by Part 3 of the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 (No. 1 of 2020) shall continue in operation for the period beginning on the 10th day of November, 2021 and ending on the 9th day of February, 2022.”

I am here to introduce a resolution to extend the sunset clause of three pieces of Covid-19 legislation: Part 3 of the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 (No. 1 of 2020), the Health (Amendment) Act 2020 (No. 19 of 2020), and the Criminal Justice (Enforcement Powers) (Covid-19) Act 2020 (No. 14 of 2020). Members will know that these Acts are due to expire on this day week. They provide for time-limited emergency powers to protect human life and public health. These are powers that this House has already passed in order to meet the significant challenges we have faced to date in dealing with Covid-19.

We had all hoped to be well along the road to transitioning away from mandatory requirements to an approach based on public health advice, personal judgment and personal protective behaviours. That, unfortunately, is not the case. This vicious and highly contagious disease has, once again, shown how quickly it can spread. Disease incidence is high and rising. The 14-day incidence is now 668 per 100,000 population, and the five-day average is 2,588 cases. It is rising across all age groups. We are also seeing increasing numbers of people in hospital and ICU, with currently around 515 in hospital, which is nearly 4% higher than this day last week, and 90 Covid patients in ICU, as of this morning. We are also seeing increasing numbers in hospital. The number is now at 515, which is 4% higher than the same day last week. As of this morning, there are 90 Covid patients in ICU. We are in a place where we have to be concerned about the burden and impact that this level of disease is having, and could have, on our health and social care services in the coming weeks and months. We are already seeing the cancellation of procedures and operations across the country and we have to be concerned that things will deteriorate further.

In its most recent advice to me, the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, advised that “the epidemiological situation in Ireland indicates a worsening disease profile with the future trajectory very uncertain”. It is for this reason that the Government, on the advice of NPHET, decided to extend a range of public health protective measures on a mandatory basis. This means we need to extend the legislation I have mentioned.

As has always been the case throughout the pandemic, the Government continues to commit to use these exceptional powers in a proportionate way. These are emergency powers directly proportional to our emergency public health environment. Their use is confined to mitigating the impact of the disease on the public’s health, and they are not for prolonging a moment longer than is necessary in our democratic system. They are legitimate and necessary powers that are beneficial to our society in a context where public health protection is paramount with this

novel and unpredictable disease. The intention is only to use the provisions within these Acts for the measures that are currently in place, for example, the continued requirement for wearing face coverings in certain settings, the use of the Covid pass and other protective measures in the hospitality and events sectors.

As has always been the case with this disease, we cannot predict with certainty what the trajectory of the disease will be. It is responsible for us to ensure we maintain the legislative powers to enable us to continue to respond as necessary and as quickly as possible. The position of NPHEA is that the public health management of the Covid-19 pandemic must continue to be agile and responsive and to evolve in the light of changing circumstances, risks and emerging evidence. This will remain the case over the coming months.

I will now provide a summary of the Acts before the House. The Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 allows the Minister for Health to make regulations giving effect to a range of public health measures for the purposes of protecting the public from Covid-19. The Health (Amendment) Act 2020 provides for fixed payment notices in respect of certain alleged offences under the aforementioned Act. The third Act, the Criminal Justice (Enforcement Powers) (Covid-19) Act 2020, provides additional enforcement powers to An Garda Síochána to address breaches of the relevant Covid-19 regulations by businesses or services selling or supplying intoxicating liquor for consumption on the premises.

I remind the Members of the House of each of the sunset provisions in the three Acts that are pertinent to today's debate. The original extension of the sunset clauses in each of these three Acts to 9 November was provided for in the Health and Criminal Justice (Covid-19) Amendment Act 2021. The House approved these extensions when it voted to pass the legislation. Members of the House will remember that I introduced an amendment to the Bill, which originally provided for more than one extension of up to three months for each Act. The amendment I introduced, which was accepted by the House, permitted only one extension of these Acts for a period of up to three months on the passing of a resolution providing for such extensions by both Houses of the Oireachtas. After this one extension has lapsed these Acts will no longer be in operation. The resolution before the House today is to provide for this final extension of the three Acts until 9 February.

We all understand and appreciate the impact on people of this disease and the emergency measures put in place to deal with its harmful effects. I have highlighted before that Ireland is not alone in this crisis. Indeed, all across Europe and much of the rest of the world, Covid-19 has adversely impacted on societies and economies to devastating effect. We are again seeing a changing situation across Europe with rising incidence in many countries. The measures we have decided to retain in Ireland are among those that other countries are now reaching for.

Ireland has endured a profound shock to its social and economic life as we dealt with, and deal with, the impacts of the disease at individual, community and societal level. It has had an impact on almost all aspects of our lives and, for many, their livelihoods. Our strategy to manage the adverse impacts of Covid has been guided by an evolving understanding of the disease and its emerging variants, the impacts of restrictions on health and well-being as well as other aspects of society and the economy.

The House will know that extraordinary measures have been introduced to protect public health and the most vulnerable in our society. These were difficult and challenging decisions

in a crisis, with an evolving understanding of the disease, its impact, how best to manage it, what vaccines might offer and what variants might do to undermine our plans. Members of the House will know that by passing these instruments, we are prolonging on a temporary basis only the emergency health platform from which we can deal with and manage the disease. Any requirement to extend these provisions beyond 9 February will require new legislation.

These are not easy decisions for all of us in the House to make. They do not sit easily with us and they do not sit easily with the Government. It is the stated hope of the Government and, I have no doubt, of all Members of the House that we will not have to be in a position to use the provisions in these Acts any further than is currently the case. However, I must again reiterate the caveat that we simply cannot know what will face us over the coming months.

The reason we are able to keep so much open in light of such high case numbers is, of course, our vaccination programme, which continues to be a great success. It is the envy of much of the world as 93% of people eligible for a vaccination have come forward to protect themselves and to protect each other. We continue to see more and more people come forward, with more than 24,000 new registrations recently. Our booster programme for the most vulnerable is well under way. Those who are immunocompromised are receiving a third dose. Residents of long-term residential care aged 65 and over are receiving their booster, as are those aged 80 and over in the community. This week, we are beginning with booster doses for those aged between 60 and 79. Last night, I authorised booster vaccines for our healthcare workers. These will get under way either this weekend or early next week.

The continuance in operation of these emergency powers maintains the potential and flexibility to respond to an emerging Covid threat that could jeopardise public health and safety to unacceptable levels were it to go unchecked. The Government must act with caution to ensure the most vulnerable continue to be protected to the best of our ability. I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy David Cullinane: This is not the first time we have been here, where we have come back to see an extension of the emergency powers. From the outset I will say that I will oppose the motion, as I have previous motions the Minister has brought forward. I say this, and I hope the Minister accepts it, not because I oppose continuing levels of public health measures. In fact, I support them. I support the wearing of face masks, testing requirements, travel restrictions, passenger locator forms and other measures deemed essential to combating the spread of Covid-19. I accept that some restrictions will need to be maintained and some public health measures will obviously have to remain in place so long as they are necessary.

It is also reasonable to say that circumstances have changed since the legislation was first introduced in the first wave of early 2020. We are in a different place now and the Minister acknowledges this. I am opposed in principle to continuing emergency powers almost two years into a pandemic. I remember the very first debate and subsequent debates where the Minister made it very clear these were powers he did not want. These are powers which are and were rightly seen as draconian that should be in place only for as long as they are necessary. The time has come when they are no longer necessary.

I would have preferred if the Minister had brought forward appropriate primary legislation today that would not needlessly and unaccountably devolve the powers of the Oireachtas to the Minister for Health. It is the Oireachtas that makes the law and not the Government or Departments. We have a constitutional duty to protect the separation of these institutions. I say this

because time and again regulations have been crafted by the Minister for Health. Sometimes the regulations have been good. Sometimes they have been not so good. Very often, there have been many problems with those regulations. We saw the fiasco of the most recent regulations on the reopening of nightclubs. We had meeting after meeting. Every time we thought there was agreement there were more talks. We had a bizarre situation where for almost a week there were no regulations as the discussions were ongoing. There was no debate in this House, no democratic accountability, no insight, no oversight and no discussion with the Opposition to any satisfactory degree, which is unacceptable. We need to stop doing that. If there are regulations that are substantial, they should come before this House for proper debate. I support the amendment which has been tabled by Deputy Shortall which calls for exactly that.

I proposed a Bill with my colleague, an Teachta Daly, on this very issue which was not opposed by the Government on First Stage. Essentially, we called for all of those regulations that are a product of the emergency powers that were given to the Minister to come before this House no later than two weeks after they were crafted to be properly discussed and debated. Of course, that has not happened. This will be the third extension of Part 3 of the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020. It is also the tenth time that the Government has introduced more emergency powers for the Minister for Health or has sought to extend existing emergency powers already in place. That is not counting the initial Acts which we all supported in early 2020. Every time we call for more oversight, more engagement and more scrutiny and every time that is ignored. We end up with all of the messing that sometimes goes on, with mixed messages, different things being said by different Ministers, various interpretations of guidelines versus regulations, and so on. It all comes back to a clumsy approach by the Government and a lack of any real engagement with the Opposition and, indeed, with the public. The Minister devalues this House when he continues with the route that he is on. He devalues the role of the Oireachtas in crafting legislation and in having a proper debate so that where there are deficiencies or where a lack of certainty exists, this House can play, as it does, a very important role in scrutiny, oversight and debate. We have been deprived of that because of these emergency powers which we agreed to give to the Government in the very early stages of the pandemic for justifiable reasons because we were in an emergency. Everybody accepted that when the emergency was over, those powers should be scrapped. Yet the Minister is coming here again in a completely different set of circumstances looking for this Act, and all of the other Acts, to be extended by a further three months. That is not acceptable and is not the way that these types of issues should be dealt with.

I will raise a number of issues with regard to the booster jab, which was mentioned by the Minister. First, I welcome the fact that the booster jab will be given to those on the front line in healthcare. I have been calling for this for some time and it is the right move. I know that NIAC made a recommendation and the Minister has authorised that use and this needs to happen very quickly.

We know how difficult this is for those on the front line in healthcare at the moment. Many of them have had Covid-19, and in some instances have had it multiple times. Many are out of work. These workers are on the front line and at the coalface of dealing with this virus. It was the right thing to do, as belated as it was.

I also raised privately with the Minister a number of weeks ago a difficulty which some blood cancer patients are having in getting their booster jabs. The problem is that they do not know who is going to roll it out. Many of them would have received their initial jabs, for example, from the Beacon Hospital. They contact the Beacon Hospital and are told to go to their

GP. They go to their GP and are told to go back to the Beacon Hospital. They do not know what to do and are simply looking for clarity. Do they have to take any action themselves or is this something that they will be contacted on? That is a reasonable question that they want to have answered because they are simply looking for clarity.

We need to be planning now for the roll-out of the booster jab for the entire population at some point. NIAC will make a recommendation on when the appropriate time for that is. I understand that we also have to play our part to ensure that the rest of the world and developing countries have access to the vaccines. It is prudent that we start planning now for the roll-out of the booster jab for the entire population.

While we will deal more substantially with some of the wider health issues this evening in a Private Members' motion I am tabling - I hope that the Minister will be here for that debate - I have to say that what is happening in our hospitals at the moment is absolutely shocking. When one talks to people on the front line, one finds that they are beyond exhaustion. I have never seen anything like it. When one looks at what is happening in hospitals in places around the country like Limerick, Sligo, Kerry and Galway, one sees that overcrowding is at record levels for this time of the year. The sheer volume of unscheduled care which is hitting those acute hospitals is forcing them again to have to cancel scheduled care and not just electives. We are seeing where some hospitals have to cancel time-sensitive care also. That has had to happen time and again during this pandemic. We all know the consequences of that, with a very significant amount of built-up missed care that has to be caught up with. That is, in part, why we are seeing many presentations now to emergency departments where people are presenting in greater numbers but they are also sicker when they present because many of them are people who, perhaps, did not get the level of care that they should have got because of all of the measures that had been put in place in hospitals during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This is a very difficult time period. We have over 500 people a day, on average, on hospital trolleys. Those on the front line are wondering what is going to happen for the rest of November as we progress towards December and January. Many of them talk to me about moral injury where they cannot take a break or take annual leave because of the pressures they are being put under by hospital management to stay for as long as they can because of the sheer volume of work and the number of patients who need to be treated. That is simply not sustainable. I said to the Minister as far back as the summer, in June, that we needed to prepare for the winter and for what was coming at us because we could potentially have a change in the pattern of Covid-19, we could have the flu with us and we also could have, as I see it now, more people presenting with respiratory and other illnesses in to our emergency departments.

We have real problems with GP access and with out-of-hours GP access. Many people cannot get access to a GP in their surgery, which is also forcing more people into emergency departments who probably should not be there. A perfect storm has hit the health service. The victims are patients, who have been left on trolleys or are now having their care cancelled, and those on the front line who have had enough.

Something has to happen and a real plan has to be put in place. I do not have any faith in the waiting list plan of the Minister. I ask him to forget about it. What I have seen of the Minister's waiting list plan is not going to work. Wait times are going to go up because electives and procedures are being cancelled. The Minister very much needs to take a fundamental look at doing something profound and urgent to address the real crisis we have in our hospitals.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: An tAire Sláinte is asking this House for the power to make up restrictions and regulations, as he sees fit, for another three months. This is the tenth time since the emergency powers were first agreed to deal with the immediate challenges posed by the onset of the pandemic that we are being expected to renew the blank cheque and to suspend normal parliamentary oversight. That is as the public sees it.

It is borne out by the chaotic scenes in respect of live events only last week and again the week before that. We are being asked to sign off on regulations that we have not seen. Last week, businesses and workers in the live events and nightlife industry were expected to comply with regulations that they had not seen or had any advance notice of. That is a joke. It makes a mockery of the whole notion of the rule of law. Ministers are placing themselves above democratic oversight. People are expected to abide by laws before they even have a chance to read them. The arrogance of Ministers demanding a blank cheque from the Dáil is matched by the sheer contempt with which they have treated the arts and culture sectors since the start of the pandemic.

For months, live events and nightlife were literally the only aspect of reopening for which Government had still to prepare a plan. The Departments of Health; Enterprise, Trade and Employment; the Environment, Climate and Communications; and Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media all knew this. We kept hearing about pilot test events and oversight groups which were supposedly planning for a planned reopening. How did we then find ourselves on the morning of 22 October, the long-announced date for the reopening, with no plan having been released for live events? Guidelines were issued only late in the afternoon of the reopening date and none of them were backed up by legally binding regulations. We know that the Attorney General has helpfully explained the distinction between advisory guidelines which do not carry any weight and legally binding regulations.

That was explained when the Tánaiste needed to be rescued from the fallout of the cronies' dinner he attended with others in the Merrion Hotel. Yet again, the Government was trying to blur the line between what is law and what is advisory, to cover its own failure to plan. Many club owners were unable to open on 22 October because the Government had left them completely in the dark as to what was required on that date. If that was not bad enough, the same happened last week, when regulations that were meant to come into effect on 29 October were published only that day. Again, many businesses simply could not reopen, which meant people were laid off and workers went without a night's pay almost two years after their dreams of reopening were crushed.

I sit on a cross-party committee on which colleagues from all parties focus on the music and entertainment sector. We have written today to the Ministers, Deputies Catherine Martin and Humphreys, and the Tánaiste, to demand action to help to mitigate the damage the Government has done. We state in that letter:

Events and gigs have been cancelled, numbers attending events have reduced dramatically and this is leading to great uncertainty about the viability of future work. The impracticality of new restrictions along with the mass confusion over to whom and to where restrictions apply is reducing employment opportunities and, in some cases, leading to zero opportunity.

The Government is not just limiting opportunities with confused guidelines; it is imposing cuts. Last week saw many musicians, artists and arts workers forced off the pandemic unem-

ployment payment, PUP, and moved on to the jobseeker's allowance or, in some cases, given nothing. Why was no alternative support plan put in place to replace the PUP at least until the music and events sector can fully recover next spring or summer? We know the Departments of Social Protection and Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media were given a detailed proposal on Covid support for arts workers that would have seen those workers moved from PUP to a part-time job incentive scheme for the self-employed. Why was no action taken to deliver that proposal? Why has the Minister ignored repeated requests to provide a hardship fund to help artists who are struggling as a result of the public health emergency and the restrictions and regulations which the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is seeking to extend today?

Deputy Ged Nash: Even two years ago, the notion that the Dáil would be proposing to extend any types of restrictions on the way we live our lives would have been unthinkable. The prospect of a global pandemic that has thus far taken the lives of more than 5,000 Irish citizens and millions of lives across the globe was the stuff of science fiction, thrillers and horror movies. It is through the lens of that catastrophic and ongoing loss of life, the ongoing health impact for thousands who have had Covid-19 and the moral duty on us to do all we can to protect and save lives that we must view this extension. It is time for reflection but it is also time to remind the Government that it cannot rely on restrictions alone to combat the dangers of the virus.

There are things the Government still needs to do from a practical and policy point of view to allow some semblance of normality to return as we face into the challenge of the next few months in trying to live alongside this deadly virus. Where is the serial testing plan for nursing homes, as my colleague, Deputy Kelly, asked earlier? Why are we still waiting for the introduction of a statutory sick pay scheme? What is the status of a structured roll-out of antigen testing in schools and workplaces? First, however, we should reflect that yesterday, 1 November 2021, there were 2,855 new cases, compared with 546 cases on 1 November 2020. On 2 January 2021, there were 3,392 new cases. Where will we be in January 2022 and how can we prevent another January like this year's occurring? A total of 75% of the population is fully vaccinated but we are by no means out of the woods. We must approach this winter with precautionary measures and continue to manage regulation in an informed way.

The Labour Party agrees with this motion to extend the existing legislation because we are entering a very difficult winter. The sickness and loss of life we saw late last year and early this year cannot be allowed to happen again. With infection numbers on the rise, we must be vigilant and take responsible actions to help save lives. Given where the numbers currently are and the continued pressure on the health service, it is necessary, in our assessment, to maintain safeguarding measures in various public settings. We continue to support the extension of certain criminal justice measures and the mandatory wearing of masks. Action to protect workers and the public throughout the winter period must be maintained.

Will the enforcement agencies get serious about dealing with establishments that routinely flout the regulations on the checking of certificates? This is causing fear and anxiety and it needs to be tackled head-on from a public confidence point of view. I am glad that the calls by the Labour Party's health spokesperson, Deputy Duncan Smith, and others, including me, for front-line healthcare workers to be given booster vaccinations have been heeded. With the rising number of Covid hospitalisations, the longer we leave the booster campaign, the more challenging it will be as we will likely lose vaccinators to other employment, as has been the case in the past. The delivery of booster shots needs to start now. I welcome the Minister's announcement that the intention is to begin the programme next weekend or early next week. With 3,500 healthcare workers currently out sick, there can be no further delay. The level of

hospitalisations relating to Covid has increased over recent weeks. The prudent and careful thing to do is to give healthcare workers the best possible protection as we face into an uncertain winter. This is a critical time for our hospitals and front-line workers, as all speakers will undoubtedly note. Health staff are exhausted and all the analysis shows that their mental well-being has been badly impacted by the pandemic. They must have the best possible protection as they face another uncertain winter of fighting this virus.

On a separate but related matter, the Government has missed the opportunity to provide the flu vaccine free of charge to everyone this year. The Covid vaccine roll-out means we have the infrastructure in place and the institutional knowledge and experience to deliver such a programme to all citizens. Doing so would have the potential to take pressure off emergency departments throughout the country this winter season. I cannot for the life of me understand why it did not happen. There is a real dread among healthcare staff and, indeed, among all of us about what lies ahead this winter. We need to ensure the HSE can deploy surge capacity at short notice if we experience a sudden spike in cases, and to prepare our acute hospitals for the weeks ahead. I will put to the Minister a question that was raised earlier today with the Tánaiste at Leaders' Questions by my party leader, Deputy Kelly. The HSE winter plan is normally published in September. When can we expect to see that plan and what will it contain?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We are far from being out of the woods yet. Yesterday, the Department of Health confirmed 2,855 new cases of Covid-19, which is very worrying, with 515 people in hospital, of whom 91 are in ICUs. On the previous occasion on which an extension of these powers was proposed, last May, there were 448 cases, 99 people in hospital and 44 in ICU. We are far from being in the clear. The increase in cases is hugely concerning and we must do all we can to protect people's lives.

As the use of antigen testing is increasing, I am concerned that those tests are not catching some cases. A constituent contacted me recently whose workplace was impacted when a staff member had a negative result on an antigen test but a positive result on a PCR test. Are concerns being raised with the Minister about the proposals to roll out antigen testing? I also want to ask about the provision of free antigen testing. Many people have contacted me to point out that the tests are expensive. Will the Minister respond to me in writing on that point?

I welcome the announcement last night of the extension of the provision of booster vaccines to healthcare workers. Those vaccines will be administered from this weekend. Will the Minister comment on the booster vaccine programme for the community? I have had a large number of calls about booster shots for the over-60s. There is confusion about the timeline and also in regard to communication. I know how hard the Minister and his Department are working but it seems to me there is a fall-down in terms of communication. Whether the information is given out through newspapers, other media or by doctors, it is important that people get it. I know how hard doctors are working but I reiterate that we are still falling down when it comes to communication.

It is important that we take the opportunity to applaud the vaccinators.

4 o'clock

For nearly two years now it has been very hard for people, and it is important that we recognise the hard work that is being done. It is also important that 90% of the population aged 12 years and over is fully vaccinated, and to point out to the Irish people that the progress in that

regard has been very welcome. Vaccination is going to be our protection. Our collective efforts have protected thousands of people. They have been sick but because they have had the vaccination they are on the mend, thank God.

However, as of 27 October, a total of 5,436 Covid-19 related deaths have been reported in Ireland. There were 67 deaths notified in the week up to 27 October. These are mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters. Each life has to be mourned. Every family has been affected in some way, and it is hard. This means that through the coming winter, possibly in the face of high levels of infection, we will remain dependent on public understanding and buy-in to the basic public health measures to minimise opportunities for this virus to transmit. Again, communication is very important, and we must ensure we mind each other, wash our hands, maintain social distance and wear a mask. The increase is very concerning. I spoke to many elderly people recently and there are concerns about going back out into the community. That is something we must look at.

I have a question about ventilation, particularly in schools. Schools in Carlow have exhausted a lot of recommendations to increase the ventilation, but the CO2 monitors supplied to the schools by the Department are still recording inadequate levels of ventilation. What is the update on this? I raised it with the Taoiseach two weeks ago so I wonder if there is an update on it.

I also have a question about hospital visits, something that has affected me, and in particular for families who have somebody who is near the end of life. I understand we must be mindful of staff and patients in hospitals, but where somebody is coming to the end of his or her life there have to be compassionate grounds for visiting. That is not there, and I have gone through this myself. I ask the Minister to look at compassionate grounds for visiting, particularly for families who have a member in hospital who is near the end of life. The Minister will know, and I know, from dealing with people in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny that it is very hard if somebody cannot get in to visit a loved one in a hospital when it is known that the person does not have a long time to live. I ask him to examine this and revert to me on it.

I realise we must support people and that businesses and individuals are trying to support our recovery. We must look out for each other, help each other and protect ourselves. It is all about minding and protecting each other. Hopefully, by early next year we will see changes, because it is very hard. I find from working in the community and trying to get back to as much normality as possible that people need a roadmap. We just need to make sure that we look after each other. I support this motion.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are back in this situation again. We probably all bore ourselves at this stage by saying that we accept that this pandemic is going to continue into the future and that we are still in an incredibly precarious situation. Many of us have probably enjoyed, for want of a better term, the reopening of certain events, but obviously we are looking at everything with trepidation as regards the numbers. The situation has continued and there are very bad circumstances in hospitals. Staff are out and staff are under severe pressure, having been through unreal pressure for a significant time.

The roll-out of boosters for front-line staff is necessary. We all recognise that. We probably hoped that it would have happened earlier. We must ensure that there are no hiccups in the roll-out because any mitigations that can be operated must be carried out, particularly in respect of those who are working at the coalface in medical care. I believe there has to be a

wider roadmap and timeline regarding booster vaccines. There is no doubt that there has to be a flu vaccine campaign that is as strong as possible because we know that we are almost in a situation that is the worst of all worlds. Obviously there will be Covid-19, there are people who are presenting with respiratory disorders and there are people presenting with many other disorders and illnesses, some of which have been exacerbated by people not presenting during the pandemic and, therefore, we must ensure that all due diligence and everything possible is done from the point of view of ensuring safety in the hospitals.

We have said many times previously that there has been a failure to deal with the capacity that should be available in respect of ICU, high-dependency units, HDU, and all the other requirements, and that is going to lead to difficulties now. However, we must do everything possible from the point of view of reducing the pressure. At the same time, we all are fed up to some degree of coming back to the House to enact emergency legislation. We accept that there are certain mitigations, guidelines and rules for the ways we need to live our lives into the future, whether that involves masks and the precautions we can take either individually or as a group. We need to look at something closer to primary legislation rather than the continuity of emergency legislation. We need rules to be dealt with in the House, with back and forth regarding the rights and wrongs. We could deal with some of the anomalies that have occurred throughout the many levels and many reopenings. That is what must be done rather than this continuity of emergency legislation.

In the wider area of health, a number of Members were at the INMO protest outside the House earlier. A large number of students were at it, given that we are still dealing with the issue of pay for student nurses and midwives. They called for movement. There is a possibility of movement in respect of first years, but we need greater clarity with regard to the second and third years. The report on pay and allowances must be published as soon as possible. That is their request.

As we are dealing with the issues in the pandemic, it would be remiss of me not to raise the Dealgan House Nursing Home and the fact that it is more than a year since the Minister engaged with the families. He said they need a mechanism to provide the truth. They need an answer as soon as possible. My view is that a public inquiry is the only thing that will work in that case.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after “9th day of February, 2022”:

“and any new regulations introduced under this legislation shall be brought before the Dáil for prior approval.”

The Minister is today seeking yet a further extension in the special powers that were granted to him last year in dire emergency circumstances. It is true that when the initial legislation was agreed by the Dáil we knew very little about Covid-19. Our level of knowledge has increased greatly since then and we know there are many other things that have to be done to reduce the incidence of Covid, even though many of those things have not been taken on board by the Government. I will refer to those momentarily.

These emergency powers are very wide-ranging and gave the Minister *carte blanche* to introduce whatever regulations were deemed necessary. While people were prepared to do that in the very difficult emergency circumstances last year, the situation has changed somewhat. Every time we have discussed these draconian powers, I have always made the point that prior

to the introduction of any regulations under this legislation, the Minister should bring those regulations to the Dáil. We should be able to scrutinise them and we should have a role in deciding whether they should get the go-ahead. Experience has borne out the wisdom of that kind of approach.

On occasion, the introduction of regulations can only be described as chaotic, for example, the enforcement regulations for the Garda. Gardaí were being told to go out and enforce these before the regulations were actually passed at a time there was no training for the enforcement of regulations. There was no publicity for them. There was no briefing on them for Members or anybody else. Very often the Minister and other Ministers were not *au fait* with the provisions of those regulations.

The Minister was given a blank cheque, which I believe was wrong. The regulations should have been brought back before the House. What he has done, and is proposing to continue to do, has wide-ranging implications for people's fundamental freedoms. There is a need for much greater scrutiny and much greater consultation in respect of these. I ask him to consider the Social Democrats' amendments to each of the three motions. These amendments propose that no new regulations be introduced without prior Dáil approval. The Minister has had considerable co-operation from this side of the House and in that spirit of co-operation I ask him to consider supporting these amendments as reasonable safeguards.

We know little about what has happened in respect of enforcement. No data are available on the level of enforcement of specific regulations by gardaí. For example, we have no data on prosecutions, which is not a healthy situation from the point of view of accountability for the enforcement of law. We should be getting regular reports on the extent of enforcement of these draconian powers.

I have grave concern over the Government's response to what is happening with Covid. In its most recent letter, NPHET has indicated that since early October, case counts are following the pessimistic scenario. In its letter, it made projections that during November case numbers would be likely to be up at between 2,500 and 3,000. We were up at the top of that range in October and case numbers are continuing to rise. The numbers in hospitals and in ICU are concerning. Apart from that are the implications of downstream cancellation of essential surgeries. Cancer care, heart surgeries and other procedures are being sacrificed. Separate to the cost associated with people who have Covid and are in serious condition, enormous costs are being paid by other people who are being denied access to regular healthcare, which is a matter of real concern.

My concern is that numbers are going in the wrong direction and nothing the Minister is proposing to do will change the direction of those worrying figures. He hopes the figures will plateau at the end of November. I do not know what that is based on. Why will they plateau and what will happen if they do not? There seems to be a significant element of wishful thinking on the part of Government. The Minister is repeating the mistakes of the past by relying almost exclusively on vaccinations. While it is great to have vaccinations and boosters, they will not solve the problem on their own. The other measures need to be prioritised. The Government continues to ignore the critical issue of ventilation in schools. The same applies in hospitality and in the workplace. If the Government continues to do that, the figures will continue to rise, which is unacceptable. The Minister needs to stop the wishful thinking and start doing the things that we know work.

Finally, I quote Orla Hegarty who wrote, “The tools of prevention are well understood and available, many at no cost.” Why are we not using those tools?

Deputy James O’Connor: I thank the Minister for being here today to discuss the potential for the extension of the emergency powers that were enacted to try to protect people from contracting Covid-19 and to deal with the ongoing crisis that faces the country and the rest of the world. It is important to acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of healthcare and other workers who have been working on the front line of the Covid-19 crisis in different sectors. In particular, I mention An Garda Síochána, the HSE and hospitals.

We are in a precarious position, as has been stated by some responsible Deputies. I have listened carefully to the debate over the past hour. I am not sure I am entirely happy with what I have heard some Opposition Members say about the Government’s measures. However, above all else, there is an acknowledgement by every Member that enforcing lockdowns is an horrifically blunt instrument that we do not want to see. We are all aware of how much damage it does to people’s mental health and well-being, as well as to the economy. The economy has been one of the topics of lesser importance relating to Covid-19, which is welcome; it is all about people’s health, which is only right.

I have continually supported the measures the Government has introduced on the basis that it was in the best interests considering the situation in which we found ourselves. I do not want us to be back in that situation again but that is outside the control of every politician here. I am far from an expert. Looking around the Dáil, very few people are qualified with specific knowledge in epidemiology and other areas of medicine. It is important for us to listen to expert advice, which can be contested and which is not always right.

As a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications, I have frequently raised the issue of NPHET’s hesitancy on antigen testing, which was an enormous mistake. I have travelled a little in Europe recently while it has been safe to do so primarily for reasons of work. Other countries have a very open attitude to antigen testing. The benefit of hindsight is great but it was clearly spelled out by many different experts that antigen testing had a significant role to play in trying to limit the spread of Covid-19. It unacceptable that we have waited until now to roll out a proper State-backed antigen system. There are flaws with it.

Unfortunately, in my area at the moment we have significant and concerning outbreaks of Covid-19. It is also concerning that younger primary schoolchildren seem to be the source of many cases. I ask the Minister to take this point away even if he does not listen to anything else I have said. He needs to speed up the rate at which the HSE sends antigen tests to houses. I have heard of multiple cases locally where people have been waiting for an unacceptable period from the point of getting a phone call from the HSE regarding contact tracing to antigen tests being posted out. I ask the Minister to fix that and put his shoulder to the wheel on the matter because it will save lives. It is very important.

It will be important over the next number of months to have an open and cross-party conversation with the Irish media about communicating the international position around Covid-19. Bad and all as it has been in Ireland, we must put it in perspective as well. It has been difficult for all age groups in society, and I speak as one of the younger Members in the Oireachtas. Internationally, Covid-19 cases are taking a concerning trajectory. The latest data from Israel seems to indicate a glimmer of hope around the effectiveness of the booster shot. I would like to see a better focus, whether it is once every two or three weeks, with a briefing given to people

on what is going on in different countries.

Everybody is so busy with their own lives. I do not blame people who are working and raising families. They may be up the walls with their own lives. Nevertheless, it is important for public buy-in to what we are trying to achieve, which is to limit a major outbreak of Covid-19 in the country and preventing ourselves from going into another lockdown. It is about using the legislation we are debating, and it will be quite important over the next number of months. There is no question that it does damage and we must consider its importance. Only yesterday there were more than 2,800 cases, with approximately 500 people being treated in our hospitals. We have yet to see the full extent of the winter flu and other pressures that generally come on our health system in the winter months. It is an important point to be made.

I hope we will get through the next 12 months with Covid-19 behind us. I had thought it would be the case by now but, unfortunately, it has not been. Building resilience in our healthcare system will be important. One of the greatest impacts the Minister could make would be to consider issues affecting recruitment of healthcare professionals in our system to try to improve efficiency or how easy it would be for people to come to the Republic of Ireland to work in that system. That is whether people are Irish citizens who have trained or gained qualifications in universities or other institutes in the country that teach the skills required to work in healthcare or people who come to Ireland as foreign citizens. This is an arduous process and it is not helping the health system to get in the specialists we require in many different areas so we can bolster our healthcare service in Ireland. Facing the public ahead of the next general election, I would like to be in a position to say this Government made a profound effort to try to improve the efficiency of our existing healthcare service by improving the process of getting a job in the system if a person has appropriate skills.

It is important we reference the booster shot campaign and I welcome the moves made in providing booster shots to those deemed as vulnerable. I encourage the Minister to continue working in that regard so people of all age groups who would like to get the booster shot can have it made available to them once the epidemiological advice indicates it is in their best interests for that to happen.

I referred earlier to the question of younger children contracting Covid-19. In my municipal district there was one significant case, although I will not identify the location. Covid-19 outbreaks in primary and secondary schools are a concern. I had the opportunity to engage with people who have been working, and I acknowledge lobbying in some cases, to see the introduction of some type of air purification systems. I am not an expert on the point but the point is worth making. It is one of the few cases of lobbying I have experienced as a Deputy where individuals are seeking something that may be in the public interest and where the Government could act on it.

I would like the Department of Health and NPHE to give further consideration to air purification systems. I was in some European countries recently where such systems have been rolled out and backed by governments. We have CO2 systems in our schools but we know air-borne transmission is one of the key concerns in the spreading of Covid-19 and it is responsible for the vast majority of cases. Consideration of such systems would be worth the effort, time and resources of the Department.

The next couple of months may leave us in quite a precarious position. I do not know if I fully agree with some of the measures taken. I am concerned by the growing rate of cases and

the trajectory seems to be of significant concern. I am not being overly critical but I want to be observant. We must act carefully because we cannot end up in a position again that we saw at the start of this year. Let us face it - I was guilty of it as well - many politicians came in here preaching about the need to lift restrictions in the run-up to last Christmas under pressure put on us. Mistakes were made and we all saw the consequences afterwards. I regret that and it is important to say that. I ask the Minister to tread carefully so as not to put us again in a position, if the Government can do it at all, of another elongated lockdown. I hope the vaccines will prevent that from happening and there will be a strong uptake of booster shots to prevent the worst from happening.

Debate adjourned.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss the decision to grant permission for the iconic south Kerry greenway and the need for construction funding; (2) Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - le plé a dhéanamh ar an ngéarghá di tuilleadh Gaelcholáistí chun freastal ar an éileamh i mBaile Átha Cliath; (3) Deputy Thomas Pringle - to discuss the next steps relating to the Brandon report and the actions of the HSE in response to same; (4) Deputy Barry Cowen - to discuss the need to ensure that measures to enhance competition in the energy sector are implemented and enforced; (5) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the urgent need in the community for the reopening of Odin's Wood day centre for older persons; (6) Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to discuss the new relationship and sexual education programmes in primary and post-primary schools; (7) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss plans to upgrade the Carrignavar wastewater treatment facility; (8) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss the retention of part-time fire brigade staff and their terms and conditions; (9) Deputy Martin Kenny - to discuss the extension of cardiac catheterisation lab services in Sligo University Hospital; (10) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss plans for bus shelters for all major bus stops in cities, towns and villages in Ireland; (11) Deputy Marian Harkin - to discuss the granting of licences for gold mining in north County Leitrim; (12) Deputies Pa Daly and Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss the provision of community care for the elderly; (13) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss plans to provide Carlow town with a design 2 ambulance base; (14) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss Ireland's commitments to climate action at COP26; (15) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss issues arising from the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme; (16) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss the progress that has been made in ensuring that Pineview Gardens Estate, Moyross, Limerick, is removed from the red-zone demolition category; (17) Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - to discuss the role and input of the Department of Justice into the proposed citizens' assembly on drugs; (18) Deputy Réada Cronin - to discuss staffing issues at Naas general hospital; (19) Deputy Catherine Connolly - to discuss the danger and threats to public safety as a result of the increased number of assaults occurring in Eyre Square and the streets of Galway; (20) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss how Ireland through our seat on the UN Security Council will address the decision by the Israeli state to designate six Palestinian human rights groups operating in the West Bank as terror organisations; (21) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss the need to secure funding for the entire remainder of track renewal on the Ballybrophy railway line to end

the intermittent closures that have impacted the line; and (22) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss the lack of insurance cover affecting rural pursuits.

The matters raised by Deputies Griffin, Harkin, Ó Snodaigh and Cahill have been selected for discussion.

Extension of Part 3 of the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020: Motion (Resumed)

The following motion was moved by the Minister for Health on Tuesday, 2 November 2021:

That Dáil Éireann resolves that the amendments effected by Part 3 of the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 (No. 1 of 2020) shall continue in operation for the period beginning on the 10th day of November, 2021 and ending on the 9th day of February, 2022.”

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after “9th day of February, 2022”:

“and any new regulations introduced under this legislation shall be brought before the Dáil for prior approval.”

- (Deputy Róisín Shortall).

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I commend front-line workers who kept the country on its feet throughout the pandemic. Sinn Féin supports the waiving of Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, NMBI, registration fees this year, as we did last year, as a way of showing gratitude for the Trojan work of nurses and midwives during the pandemic. Healthcare workers deserve more than a clap on the back and they certainly deserve more than a once-off bank holiday, as currently reported. Our native Kildare saint, St. Brigid, or the goddess Brigid, as some see her, certainly deserves more than a once-off bank holiday.

I have written to the Minister to ask that the NMBI registration fee be waived this year for the tens of thousands of nurses and midwives who have sacrificed so much in the past two years. It would be a small but important gesture to demonstrate that the political system stands with them and the Government understands the needs of healthcare workers. Sinn Féin will continue to advocate in the interests of these workers.

The substantive motion relates to the extension of measures arising from the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020, the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020, the Criminal Justice (Enforcement Powers) (Covid-19) Act 2020 and the Health (Amendment) Act 2020. We cannot just roll over these measures without a plan or direction to help our healthcare system to cope better with the immense pressure it is under. It is far too risky an approach and the Government has taken enough risks with people’s lives. We have a Government that is kite-flying and the Minister knows it is a recipe for disaster.

Winter is coming and we have been promised a fantastic plan imminently to deal with waiting lists. I hope it will be more successful than the plan put forward by a former Taoiseach, Mr. Enda Kenny, 14 years ago when he promised to end the scandal of long waiting lists and patients on trolleys. We all know how that went. I have reason to be pessimistic, as all we have to do is look at the mess Sláintecare is in.

A constituent of mine was due to have an operation a few weeks ago but it was cancelled at the last minute. The man has been on a waiting list for seven years. The reason for cancellation was that the consultant would not be there on the day but I suspect the consultant got a better offer at a private hospital. The operation was rescheduled for this week and the constituent had to call at 6 a.m. to see if a bed was available but the hospital did not know at the time and he was told to call back at 8 a.m. On calling back at 8 a.m. he was told somebody would call him back and he received a call at 9.40 a.m. to say there was no bed. This was after two weeks of reducing medication and living with the resultant pain and inflammation. What kind of way is that to treat people? The Minister should be absolutely ashamed of himself.

Will he consider our older people as much of the language used around nursing homes is wrong? When families are spoken to, words such as “dangerous”, “damaging”, “harmful”, “allowed”, “permitted”, “limited”, “booking system” and “restricted” are used. This language reflects the attitudes and culture in our nursing homes. Both need to change drastically to reflect the person-centred care that is referred to in the glossy brochures. We must remember these are homes. They are not prisons or warehouses where our old people go to die. They live in them, and life is for living. We must look after them. The mental health of our older people must be considered. It is equally as important as physical health. Families are willing to take precautions but we must meet them halfway.

The virus is in a new phase. Personal responsibility plays a major part. The new reality is we will live with this virus. Rules must recognise and reflect that we are supposed to be moving out of the emergency period. Almost 90% of the eligible population - those aged over 12 years - are fully vaccinated. We need measures that reflect our current situation and where we are going.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will be sharing time with Deputy Mick Barry. I will make several different points concerning Covid, but particularly on the repressive powers the Minister proposes to extend now. We oppose those repressive powers and their extension. It is striking to compare the approach taken by the Government in extending significant restrictions on civil liberties to its approach concerning protections and supports for ordinary people. The Government has already cut the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, by €50. There is another cut coming down the line to the PUP on 16 November. The bans on evictions and rent increases have already been removed and we still do not have a mandatory employer sick pay scheme nearly two years into this pandemic. This gives an indication of the Government’s priorities and its approach in keeping these repressive powers.

There is a contrast between the reopening of indoor nightclubs and the maintaining and extension of powers to ban and criminalise outdoor protests, when we know the risk of transmission in an outside environment is minimal compared with the dangers of transmission in indoor environments. The priority of the Government and its approach towards civil liberties is clear. This extension of restrictions on civil liberties in the context of the Government discussing the need to live with Covid during a time of high daily case numbers which are increasing poses the question whether the Government will ever repeal these repressive powers and if they are likely

to become permanent. All the repressive powers in this State, such as the Special Criminal Court for example, were introduced in response to particular emergencies. The same occurred internationally with legislation introduced following 9/11 in the US, such as the Patriot Act, and 7/7 in Britain. Does the Government plan to introduce further restrictive regulations in the near future due to its failure to deal with the current wave of Covid?

There is a broader point to be made here concerning the approach of the Government of relying, on the one hand, on repressive powers and, on the other, as was interestingly referred to by a Deputy on the other side of the House, to lean and sway in the direction of the latest demands from business lobbying organisations and to concede, regardless of public health demands, at any given point. We must understand it is clear, as acknowledged by experts in advance, that while vaccines are crucial in the fight against Covid, and everyone should be encouraged to be vaccinated, they are not a silver bullet. To protect Christmas, to ensure we will not be in the situation of having a so-called meaningful Christmas again, and to prevent future lockdowns, we need a vaccine-plus strategy. We need vaccination, ventilation and vastly increased numbers of tests compared with the number currently being conducted.

For more than a year, People Before Profit has been pushing for a proper focus on and investment in ventilation in our schools, offices and hospitality settings. Transmission is taking place in those indoor settings, but the Government repeatedly refuses to take action on this. Instead, it has actually cut back on these services. It is still the situation today that there is no legislation on ventilation. It is a crazy situation, when this is a virus that is primarily carried in the air, that we do not have legislation on the right of workers to have clean air and not to work in environments that contain more than 900 parts per million of CO₂ or, in circumstances where that is not possible, to have high efficiency particulate air, HEPA, filters to ensure Covid does not circulate.

This brings me to the crucial question of schools. We agree that schools must remain open, but the Government should not sell the lie that schools are safe and that they are not a place of transmission. That is patently not true. It should be stated clearly that it is vital for our society that schools remain open, but the supports must be put in place. We need HEPA filters in every classroom in the State, as is the case in parts of Australia. In Ireland, we do not have a single air purifier. We need to return to contact tracing and testing instead of continuing to turn a blind eye to what is happening. It is not possible to fight Covid on the cheap.

Deputy Mick Barry: Covid-19 will be with us forever; so said the Tánaiste last week. Does the Government, therefore, want the Covid emergency powers to be with us forever too? Serious civil liberties issues were involved in the introduction of these powers in the first place, and that was why I voiced my opposition in the first Dáil debate on them. Today, there are serious civil liberties issues in rolling the powers over every three months, as the Minister seems intent on doing. To take just one example, we were told the requirement of the Covid vaccination passport would stay in place until October. The Government clearly sees them being in place for the whole of the winter. Is it the intention to keep these arrangements in place on a semi-permanent basis? To be clear, I am a strong supporter of vaccination. I appeal to all who are unvaccinated to get vaccinated. However, there are clearly civil liberties issues in keeping such an arrangement in place indefinitely at a time when alternative strategies, for example, those that might involve antigen testing, are available. This is a debate we will clearly need to return to.

I will be voting against the extension of these powers. That said, if a crucial issue arises and

there is a need for legislation on a case-by-case basis, I would have no problem voting in favour, for example, of extending the eviction ban and the rent freeze indefinitely. As for extending the powers as a whole, however, I will be voting against that.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The byword from this debate so far came from Deputy Paul Murphy when he said it is not possible to fight Covid on the cheap. Where was the Deputy for the past two years? This has not been done on the cheap. Measures were taken by the Government that were necessary to protect the health of the people. If the Government had not done that, it would have been grossly irresponsible. The measures introduced were done so in good faith and were required at the time to deal with an issue about which it was unknown how far it would extend. Other countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, have experienced total extended lockdowns of a far longer duration than any we have experienced here, and have had to reintroduce them repeatedly. This also occurred in several European countries. It is now proposed to extend the sunset clause to provide for measures that might have to be taken in the event of the virus going on a further run, and that is the correct decision. We should not avoid making that decision now or avoid the signs clear to all and sundry. There has been a revival of the virus. The numbers are increasing. The trajectory is going in the wrong direction. In those circumstances, the consequences of doing nothing are far greater than any consequences that might arise from the extension of the sunset clauses. I therefore strongly support these proposals. I would have done so in the Joint Committee on Health in the event these motions had not been taken today.

The Minister and the Government have done the best that could be done in very challenging circumstances. There will be more challenging circumstances in the weeks and months ahead and throughout the winter. In addition to what has been done, every effort must be made to respond as quickly as possible to the situation as it emerges. We must not wait and allow the virus to get a grip and become established.

More than 90% of people have had their vaccinations. There are also a number of people who have previously had Covid. The theory is that the combination of these is sufficient to create sufficient resistance to the virus, as a result of which it should wane. That can and may still happen. The weeks ahead of us will be crucial. As the effects of extensive vaccination and the public health measures that can be taken under this proposal, which are the same as those available for the past six months or two years, continue to be seen, we can delay the virus to allow more natural resistance to develop. If that does not happen, other measures may have to be taken. However, we must recognise this virus will not just disappear. It is going to be here for a while so we are going to have to work with it and do whatever can be done to reduce its impact on our society and our freedoms. Nobody wants restrictions. Nobody wants to have anything other than a normal Christmas, but we know from last year, when everybody was fatigued and rightly and understandably wanted restrictions to be relaxed, that sadly it was not the time to relax them. We all took that risk together and we were wrong. The virus marched on. It surged on and has continued to this day. The lesson we must learn is the virus has the ability to surge again and again. Because of that, we have to attack it with every means available to us.

Other speakers have referred to air purification systems. I have spoken about these in the House on several occasions. Their use in indoor situations should be considered urgently. These devices are very effective. They are capable of eliminating 100% of the virus in any given situation where they are sufficient for the square footage of the indoor space concerned. They work very effectively. We may have to resort to using these systems as well. I suggest to the Minister that this be done sooner rather than later. The impact they are likely to have should

be investigated in the early days rather than having to do it at a later stage when the situation is much more serious and damage has been done by overcrowding, which makes it very difficult for the hospital system to work. I fully appreciate the difficulties now arising and presenting. The winter plan is about to become available. There are challenges in that regard.

There is also another ongoing issue. Many people seem to forget about it. I have been a Member of this House for more than a couple of years and, during my time here, I have received advice from a great many people who told me we had too many hospitals, hospital beds, consultants and GPs. They said we had too much of everything. In actual fact, the reality is we did not have a sufficient number of any of these. A proper build-up to meet these requirements should have been considered years ago, but medical economists or other kinds of economists had other views and their views were taken on board to the extent we now have a deficiency of accommodation, nurses and consultants. We now have to try to address these issues in the middle of an emergency. That is a crazy situation and it should never have arisen.

There are lessons to be learned from this. On many occasions in recent times we have all referred to the demands having become greater. Why have the demands become greater? Because the population has become much greater. Some ask why our population is increasing and say it should not be. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle and I know well the population has become greater because fewer people have found it necessary to leave this country and go abroad. That is as it should be. We should be able to ensure our growing population's requirement for jobs is, and continues to be, accommodated at home. There is no acceptable excuse for not doing so.

I ask the Minister to bear in mind the urgency of the situation. This could be a bit like Custer's last stand. We again have time to deal with the thing. This is another opportunity. It is an airborne virus which is very active and very aggressive. It will not fizzle out overnight. We have to be in it for the long haul. That means we should now put in place whatever is necessary to defeat it at every level. We must increase the emphasis on repeat vaccinations and the use of air purification plant where and when necessary. Nursing homes are obvious places to locate such devices. They should be used to defeat the virus at an early date rather than allowing it to accelerate to the extent it becomes a major problem again. I fear that, if the virus does re-establish itself to the level it was at eight or ten months ago, we could unfortunately be in for a much more serious situation and may have to introduce much more serious restrictions. I make the point again that we should do whatever needs to be done now. We should go the whole hog and aggressively address the situation and the threat of the virus in every way possible not for just 24 hours or whatever but for as long as it takes. We should do whatever it takes to deal with it in a meaningful way. Then we can walk off and say we did our best and either won or lost. I believe we will win if we go that route. In the course of what we are doing, we have to convince everybody we are doing it for the good and the health of the country.

I forget who it was but somebody suggested we should close down everything. We should not. The country has to try to survive. However, we should have restrictions to the extent necessary to curtail the virus and force it out of the system. If we do not do that, we will be coming back to this situation again and again. I advise that we listen to the lessons of Australia, New Zealand and various jurisdictions all over the globe where appalling numbers of deaths have taken place. Such deaths have taken and are taking place here. They are also taking place on the adjoining island. These deaths will continue to take place unless really aggressive action is taken. I call for that to be done now rather than later.

Deputy Thomas Gould: As the Minister has already heard, last Thursday evening, Sport

Ireland issued new guidelines stating young people and their coaches who are not vaccinated cannot participate in indoor sporting matches without vaccination. I spoke to a number of families but will refer to one family in particular. Their 17-year-old son has been training both on his own and with his teammates over the last two years, although mostly on his own. He went to a match in the parochial hall in Gurrabraher in Cork last Saturday, only to be refused entry. The young man was distraught, as were his family and his teammates, because he could not go inside. This came as a great blow to him, his parents and all his teammates. This leaves coaches, the vast majority of whom are volunteers, in the very uncomfortable and unfair position whereby they have to turn away young people at the door because of guidelines issued at the last moment. These guidelines should have been issued at the start. Sport Ireland should have ensured they were in place.

Once again, those engaged in indoor sport feel they are an afterthought when it comes to the protocols and restrictions for the return to sport. Can something be done to meet Sport Ireland to discuss basketball and any other sports that have been affected and ensure that a solution is found so that young people can get back to playing and enjoying their games?

I have been told this week that Sciath na Scol in Cork which, for anyone who does not know, involves Gaelic games for children, has been postponed until the new year. I was in my club, St. Vincent's, last night where loads of kids were training outdoors. The same children were going into school today, but cannot play Gaelic games in their schools. It is an outdoor activity which we are telling people is the safest way to exercise. How does it make sense that every GAA club in the country is playing matches at the weekend but none of the schools can? Schools are organising challenge matches. Games are still going ahead, but the competitions are not. Who is making these decisions? If it is right for children to play in club matches, why can the same not happen in schools?

Last week Dr. Ronan Glynn advised parents to cut back on their children's after-school activities, something I found unbelievable. I am a person who has supported all of the public health advice and encouraged everyone to get vaccinated, sanitise their hands and keep the 2 m rule. I have been very supportive of making sure everyone stays safe. I am a coach and administrator. Approximately one in five children have not come back to our club after the pandemic. Different sporting organisations are trying to get children and young people back to sports because we know how vital it is for their mental health and social skills. The statements being released are contradictory to what the health advice is. Young people have been put through enough. My daughter is in a class of 33 children for five or six hours a day. She cannot go into a field and play Gaelic games with her school. This does not make sense. It is not fair and it needs to be sorted out.

On 17 May 2020, the then Taoiseach, and current Tánaiste, Deputy Leo Varadkar, said in the Chamber that we must try to find, isolate, test and care for every case and trace every contact. We are not trying to find contacts in schools. We are not even trying to contact trace children any more. This is a bad message to send out to children because it is confusing, out of touch with reality and chaotic.

This is not the first time the Government has sent out mixed messages. There is a kind of chaos around what people are being told. We need to give people clear guidance. Many families have elderly parents and grandparents. They may have vulnerable family members who might be scared because without knowing where Covid is how can they protect them? It is time to stop dithering and burying our heads in the sand, and make clear decisions to put ordinary

people first.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The extension of emergency health legislation is a serious matter and so too is our progression through the Covid pandemic, with all of its associated challenges. At present we know there are approximately 3,500 healthcare workers and professionals out of work, which in itself is putting a burden on our community and hospitals.

We know that 40% of those in hospital are doubly vaccinated, but I think that figure is higher. At the weekend, out of 18 Covid patients in University Hospital Waterford, 15 were doubly vaccinated. That points to what we all know is the case, namely, that vaccines are waning. The decision to offer boosters to healthcare workers is welcome, but it has been unduly delayed. I am sure the Minister follows the reports of the CDC. Weeks ago it recommended booster vaccines for healthcare workers and those who were vaccinated over six months ago. How long are we going to wait for NIAC to put this into place?

We still have record transmission rates in our schools, although we cannot say so definitively because we no longer have any testing regime in place. In a lot of cases, the symptoms are misunderstood by parents who have sent their children to school when they should have kept them at home. There is no HSA activity on site. Many classes have fewer than half of the students attending and many teachers are out due to being designated as Covid close contacts.

Something we have touched on many times is antigen testing. My sister in law is a school secretary in the UK. There has been antigen testing in the community there for almost eight months. At the start, children were brought into school halls for rapid testing before they were allowed into school. The UK has managed to keep all of its schools operational with very little fallout from Covid. Yet, we have had three reports on antigen testing and we are still not using it.

What about vaccine hesitancy in the community? A Covid certificate is needed to go into a nightclub, but not to visit somebody in a nursing home. There are still unvaccinated healthcare personnel in the community sector treating vulnerable and elderly patients. What supports are we providing to community nursing care? We are providing very little, as the Minister knows, because we withdrew them all on the basis that if there was an outbreak we would send in the HSA.

We have pressures in our hospital accident and emergency departments and ICUs, testing and vaccination and the deferral of other activity. Who will say we may have to have localised restrictions?

We need a public information campaign on pregnancy. As the Minister will be aware, over the weekend there was discussion about people undergoing fertility treatments who were being told not to get the vaccine.

The deferral of new healthcare appointments is an issue. I submitted a question to the Minister's Department on the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, for University Hospital Waterford. We put an extra €4 billion into the health budget this year, yet there has been no additional recruitment to the cardiac section in Waterford to expand cardiology hours. I ask the Minister to respond to the question as soon as he can.

In terms of the effects of lockdown, there has been a 30% increase in the number of patients attending hospital with cirrhosis of the liver. There are problems right across the community.

We need to mitigate them.

Antiviral drugs have been available for some time, including one from Merck, Molnupiravir, which has meant a 50% reduction in Covid deaths in early introduction. We have made no efforts whatsoever to get into a buying group, as far as I know, even though other countries are doing so. We need mitigation measures and we need to be doing a lot more than we are currently doing.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I have had contact with many disgruntled constituents who are wondering why we did not open on 22 October as was planned. I share many of their concerns. There seems to be an attitude from the Government to try to extend its power with these restrictions under the guise of being precautionary, yet as soon as they are passed they are being used as a matter of course rather than as an emergency power.

I also have another major concern which needs to be met head-on. Why are Government Members and policies being designed to scapegoat those who decided, for whatever reason, that they did not want, or could not take, the vaccine? We have the highest vaccination rates in Europe. I would like to commend all of the hard-working staff in all of the vaccination centres who have been very confident in their roll out of the vaccine programme. The constant scapegoating of the unvaccinated does not stand up to scrutiny or evidence and is completely unwarranted.

Every time we see evidence of a failure in Government policy, the narrative shifts to find the latest random thing to blame it on. There has yet to be any evidence presented which shows that vaccine passports actually serve any purpose in preventing transmission. In fact, recent studies have shown that a vaccinated person is every bit as likely to transmit this virus as a non-vaccinated person. Therefore, why is the Government continuing to divide society on this basis? Some of the language used by Ministers-----

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Deputies, that information is false and it is really important that Members of Parliament do not spread anti-vaccine information like this in the Chamber.

Deputy Verona Murphy: -----over the past few weeks when talking about the unvaccinated has been very discriminatory and sinister.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Let the Deputy-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: Thank you, Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I beg your pardon. I am sorry.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The clock-----

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is so damaging in terms of the anti-vaccine campaign.

5 o'clock

Deputy Verona Murphy: There is nothing anti-vax about some of the constituents contacting me.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Minister, please, you will have to let the Deputy speak.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The data the Deputy is reading into the record are false.

Deputy Verona Murphy: They are contacting me and telling me they are unable to take a vaccine. It is stupid to tell people they can attend weddings without certificates-----

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The Deputy's data are false.

Deputy Verona Murphy: -----if the same people cannot then go out to a restaurant the next day because they are being labelled as unvaccinated.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The Deputy's data on vaccines are false.

Deputy Verona Murphy: There is a lot in the Minister's policies that leave much to be desired.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Apologies, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Sorry, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I am now a little disjointed, as they say. Last year I called for the introduction of antigen tests. The Minister will hardly have as much to say about the antigen testing we have all been calling for for over 12 months. He has had Deputy Shanahan tell him that it has been rolled out for over eight months in the UK. Imagine sending out antigen tests in the post. No disrespect to An Post, but the reality is that every other country has seen fit to send a pack of at least ten antigen tests to every household for use as rapid tests. The people of those countries do not have to ring a phone line that may or may not be answered in order to expect tests to arrive in the post. How ridiculous does that sound? Has the Minister anything to say about that matter? He does not.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I have plenty to say-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: He does.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: -----but, as the Chair has said, we cannot have a back-and-forth.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The Minister can see the ridiculousness of it then. He can see just how ridiculous it is-----

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I can see how ridiculous the Deputy's contribution is.

Deputy Verona Murphy: -----to put a rapid antigen test into the post and expect that the PCR test will be slower. It makes no sense.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I wish to make just a quick point.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No. The constant interruption of Deputy Murphy is unacceptable. Let her finish.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: May I ask just a quick question of clarification?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The Government needs to have a system in place.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: May I ask a question on a point of order? It is a genuine question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will hold the clock for a moment. Minister, a Deputy is

speaking. You will get a chance to come in at the end, so can we let the Deputy finish, please?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: We can of course, but may I ask just a quick question of clarification of you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, you cannot. Deputy Murphy is speaking. She has the floor and, like any Deputy, you will have the floor too - at the end, presumably. I cannot see to the bottom of the list but I think you will be allowed back in.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Thank you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

I think we all know there is a percentage chance of not just the antigen test being wrong but equally the PCR test being wrong. Surely it is better to have a slightly lower accuracy level but with an immediate result, which would be more effective at identifying infectious cases, and containment as opposed to what we are seeing, which is 3,000 cases a day for the want of being able to roll out PCR testing and then testing, tracing and isolating, as we should now, two years into this virus.

I hope the Government will take back the message that it needs to stop blaming, scapegoating, ostracising and discriminating against those who are not vaccinated. I do not think history will look back kindly on some of the distasteful comments made last week, but I hope we can put in place an armoury of supports for our vaccination programme. The fact is that we have the highest vaccination rates in Europe.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Níl aon duine anseo ón Rialtas, so bogfaimid ar aghaidh go dtí the Rural Independent Group.

Deputy Michael Collins: The extension of these extraordinary powers for a further three months will impact gravely the normal conduct of life in society. It will also impact the fundamental civil rights of every citizen in 2022, with no guarantee the Government will not move to introduce new laws at that stage to extend the curtailment even further. When the Government introduced these emergency powers, we were told they would be subject to ongoing review and would be repealed if circumstances allowed and when the vaccination rates exceeded the 70% threshold. However, we have not had any published review of the impact of these measures at all. Furthermore, our vaccination rate, which was pushed as the silver bullet, has far exceeded the herd immunity rate of 70% the Government endorsed, yet the Government now wants to curtail people's freedoms indefinitely, it would appear.

This Government has shown that everything it touches becomes a mess. It has let our fisherman and farmers down. It has let our cancer patients and those suffering with mental health down. It is defunding our roads and adding to the national debt every single day while increasing taxes on every citizen. That same Government wants us to support another extension to the emergency powers in order that it can continue to restrict travel to and from Ireland, restrict travel within Ireland, stop gatherings from taking place and close premises such as schools and businesses when it wants to do so. I for one am certainly against that.

I am not in any doubt that this virus is an extremely dangerous one and I always encourage people to sanitise and be extremely careful going about their day-to-day duties. Most people are, but people need to be worked with and not dictated to. What people want is to be continuously properly reminded and so on but not dictated to, and this is a form of dictating to people. It is also a handy way of taking the eye off the ball. The real ball in my locality has been the fact

that there is no SouthDoc service in Castletownbere. We also had the issue in Bantry General Hospital where consultants were not there for 19 or 20 days during the summer. Those are the real issues. The other issue is the eye off the ball as to where the endoscopy unit for Bantry General Hospital is. It was promised to the people three and four years ago - nothing. There is not a sod turned. Look at Clonakilty Community Hospital. Has the funding been available to the hospital for its extension so it can be brought up to HIQA standards? That is what we need to concentrate on.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I would like the Minister's attention because the very first thing I want to do is publicly and humbly thank him and acknowledge a very important job he did, which was the help, kindness, care and consideration he gave to two small babies, Theo Whelan and baby Kate Mynard. As good as it is to come in here and attack the Minister and fight with him and say, "Minister, do this and do that", I publicly thank him for his involvement in that. He, his officials and others worked and helped to save those babies' lives. I will ask questions of the Minister but I will also stand up and publicly thank him. I got an opportunity another evening to mention it here, barely, but he is here now as the Minister for Health and I just say to him "thank you".

With that out of the way, I certainly do not agree with the question we are asked here because it is whether the public interest is being served by these extensions. We believe that it must be concluded that the public interest is not being served by giving the Government the powers to curtail people's rights and freedoms at a time when over 90% of our people are vaccinated. During this pandemic the Government has rushed some extraordinary laws through this House and signed into law some extraordinary regulations. These measures have curtailed people's freedoms in a most extraordinary way. The Garda has been given the power to do things we would never have thought it would be given. We believe that now the time has come to have people's individual freedoms restored and Garda powers returned to what they should be. The Government will use the Dáil to rubber-stamp these extraordinary measures.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I have 13 seconds left. We believe that this extension is a very lazy use of exceptional powers instead of the Government ramping up rapid antigen testing, which the Government has utterly failed to do and which the rural Independents called for at least 15 months ago. The Government has also failed to increase Ireland's ICU bed capacity.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: These exceptional powers the Government has introduced have many people in Kerry, especially youngsters, very upset with those powers, which are being dictated in respect of sports for youngsters. We had Sport Ireland come out late last week saying children and youngsters attending all basketball playing would have to produce vaccine passports. This is very wrong in places like Rathmore, Gneevgullia, Killarney, Firies and all the various places where all the youngsters and all the clubs had paid their membership, and it was only after that that Sport Ireland came out and said what it said. In reality, volunteers are being asked to demand that youngsters attending events produce vaccine passports. We have to remember that under-12s have not been vaccinated at all yet. It is very unfair. The whole basketball season has been thrown into mayhem, and I ask the Minister and the Government to deal with this in an honourable way. It is not fair to ask volunteers to demand vaccine passports of youngsters before they are allowed in to play basketball. Why did they not do that in the first place before the clubs registered? Why did they not ask for that and spell out what was going to be demanded rather than doing it when the money had been collected by Sport Ireland? That

is very unfair to the youngsters of Rathmore, Gneevgullia, Killarney, Tralee and all of Kerry.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Acting Chairman, but this is a very serious matter. I am appealing to the Minister and the Government to rectify this.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I thank the Deputy. His time is up. Next is the Independent Independent Group - Deputy Michael McNamara and Deputy Catherine Connolly.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I thank the Acting Chairman, I think there is only one "Independent" in the title.

While looking at this debate in my office I noticed that there was a tweet a couple of minutes ago and indeed it was from your good self, the Minister for Health, saying that everybody who opposed this was reckless. With regard to being reckless, it was reckless to have such a disregard for Parliament and for the Dáil, not for me or Deputy Connolly, or any of the Deputies here, but for the people that we represent because it is the essence of democracy. One thing that Fianna Fáil always had, that party the Minister joined so late in the day, was a fairly healthy respect for parliamentary democracy.

If the Minister wants to talk about recklessness, it is reckless to run down a health service the way our health service has been run down. The Minister did not run it down, but there are three members of the Cabinet in which he sits who had collective responsibility for running it down. The Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, when he was the Minister for Health, came up with the HSE as a way to spend money on reports. The Tánaiste, Deputy Leo Varadkar, when he was the Minister could not get out of there fast enough. The Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, caused a general election when he was the Minister for Health. We thought he was the most inept Minister for Health ever, or at least we were told that by some Fianna Fáil canvassers before the last election. That was reckless to run down a health service the way they did. It was reckless to fail to do anything about it when getting into office, which is what the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, has done. Where is the additional capacity that he spoke about and that he asked about when he was on the Covid committee? It is simply not there. Cholera hospitals were built in this city in response to a cholera outbreak. TB sanatoria were built all over the State in response to that. We had €23 billion. What was the €23 billion spent on apart from masks that are now clogging up our sewerage systems, which was junk that was brought in from China? What was the €23 billion spent on? We have nothing to show for it. Such a wanton waste of Exchequer funding is simply reckless.

If the Minister wants to talk about recklessness, it is reckless to deny children the ability to play sports during a pandemic when they are locked up in their homes. It is reckless to tell them it is safe to sit in a classroom for six hours a day but not safe to play sports. It is reckless because of the effect it has on their formation and particularly on their mental health. This is the case with some children whose parents have come to me to complain about what is going on. It is reckless to fail to look at schools and their ventilation, and to spend €23 billion without remedying this. Last winter it was understandable because it was all new but we are heading into our second winter with nothing done. I put it to the Minister that this is reckless.

Above all, it is reckless to fail to look at the science and to pretend that we are following the science but instead lurch from hysterical reaction to hysterical reaction. Let us look at the

vaccines and let us look at their efficiency and efficacy. There are studies about this. Vaccines of course have stopped people from getting seriously ill, but now we know of waning immunity. We now know that how infectious somebody is, whether they are vaccinated or not, varies relatively little. We know that there is an enduring immunity from recovery. There are also question marks still about masks and about how small are the particles by which the virus is spread. Are they so small that masks do not capture them? If the Minister wants to talk about recklessness let us talk about it, but also have an honest reflection upon his role and how reckless he has been.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not want to get into a slagging match but if the Deputy is correct and the Minister has tweeted the comment that has been attributed to him about people being reckless, this it is entirely unacceptable during a debate in the Dáil, and particularly in the context of the failure by the Government to carry out any human rights assessment of the legislation, a point I have repeatedly made. Rather than speak for myself, let me quote the Irish Council for Civil Liberties:

Our position remains the same: the system is discriminatory and has been developed without any meaningful consideration of human rights. We know of no known human rights impact assessment having been carried out before its implementation, since July, or now ahead of its proposed extension...

ICCL believes vaccination, and all medical treatment, should be a choice...

To omit testing to the certificate system, unlike most of our peers across Europe...is deeply discriminatory. Across the EU, testing is available as an alternative to vaccination...

Deputy Michael McNamara: Hear, hear.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Let me place once again on the record that I dearly value human safety and human health. We all make choices based on knowledge. I make my comments today knowing that the 550 Covid patients are in hospital with 91 in intensive care, and all of the other facts.

In my remaining time let me address what is going on here. We are being asked to extend draconian legislation without the slightest justification in the Minister's response as to why, without any human rights assessment and without any explanation of the contradictions. Somebody close to me had Covid and has recovered over six months although they were told nine months. In one of his speeches, the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, referred to a grace period of nine months which then became six months. There are many other contradictions, such as have been read out today relating to Basketball Ireland. There are at least three or four emails there where people point out contradictions over and over in the way they have been treated. Last week, a mother called up when her daughter was a contact. The mother was told an antigen test would be sent out, which was never sent out. There are any number of contradictions.

I would also like to stick with the utter danger there is to our democracy in the way the Government is dealing with this pandemic. We are certainly not all in it together. It is discriminatory and unacceptable, and it frightens me almost as much as the pandemic has frightened me, in terms of trying to protect people. On a personal level I do not have the same view but I certainly realise how significant this is. The World Health Organization has adopted a differ-

ent approach around booster vaccination. I am glad that the decision has been made to allow healthcare staff to have the choice of a booster if that is what they want. I am absolutely dispirited about the twisting of language and the divide and conquer aspect. There is a demonisation rather than building up a public health system to face this pandemic and the next one, which is inevitable. There is a failure of the Government to clarify what improvements have been made or to take responsibility for the damning situation that has existed in our hospitals, and which continues to exist, as well as no public health on the ground.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I very much welcome the debate in the House today. It is important, given the exceptional and temporary nature of the legislation, that we do have this debate. I have listened carefully and have taken as many notes as I can from colleagues. A lot of views have been expressed. Views have been expressed that this is the appropriate thing to do. Some misinformation on vaccinations has been put onto the official record of the House. There have been zero-Covid views and there have been views expressed around no measures, whatever that may be called, which proposes letting the virus run free to see what happens. Other than the misinformation on vaccines, it is good and healthy that there are a lot of different views and that there is time for these to be debated. There are diverse views and opinions. These are not normal times and this is not normal legislation. It is right and proper that it is looked at.

Emergency powers are temporary in nature but when fully utilised they do have an impact on freedoms. This is why it is right and proper that we debate this and why it is right and proper that there is a sunset clause and that new legislation would be required. This is why we are only looking for extensions of three months. This is serious legislation and these are serious regulations. They do have an impact right across the State, across our communities and across our economy.

Various Deputies have raised issues around sports. I will undertake to discuss those matters with the relevant Department and the relevant line Ministers. We want as much consistency as possible. Colleagues will appreciate at this stage that perfect consistency in comparing hospitality with sports, commerce or construction, and with so many other ways, is difficult. It is a difficult thing. Other than everything being fully open or everything being fully closed there will never be perfect consistency. We have to accept that. I believe everyone will agree that public safety and health is always first and foremost in our minds. The protection of public health from the virus, which continues to spread, is essential. The Government has always been conscious that public health measures being imposed are proportionate to the harm the virus represents. It is critical that we maintain the ability, on a temporary basis, to respond to the evolving trajectory of Covid. I have listened very carefully to what Members have said during the debate-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: While tweeting.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): One voice. I apologise to the Minister.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: -----and the resolutions to continue with these provisions are for another three months.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The Minister tweets during debates.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy should resume his seat. He should be respectful to-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: But he is not respectful when he tweets during debates.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy is long enough around to know he is out of order.

Deputy Michael McNamara: But so is tweeting during debates. The Chair is long enough around to know that is disrespectful and out of order.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Please. The Deputy should not do that. That is not fair to anybody else.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is interesting that the Deputy who is insistent on trying to stop parliamentary debate is the same one who, when asked recently on national radio, on RTÉ, whether he would encourage people to get vaccinated, refused to answer the question.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I said people should talk to a GP because I am not a doctor, and neither is the Minister-----

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I do not think this House needs any lectures-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: -----and I do not want to victimise people.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: -----from someone who clearly has such scant regard for democracy that he will not even tolerate democratic debate in his own Parliament.

Deputy Michael McNamara: You limit democratic debate to two hours, and you stand here and lie to people.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we do this through the Chair?

Deputy Michael McNamara: Yes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we have a little respect for democracy?

Deputy Michael McNamara: As long as the Minister does not take the opportunity to spread disinformation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could we please have a little respect on all sides for democracy? The Minister has the floor.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I wonder whether the Deputy would like to withdraw-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Minister, please. I did not hear what was said. You have the floor.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: With the greatest respect, I did hear what was said and I am just wondering whether the Deputy would like to withdraw his allegation that lies have been told.

Deputy Michael McNamara: No, no, you said that-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are not going into any discussion. The amendment will be put if there is not an answer from the Minister.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I have lis-

tened very carefully to the debate. It was a very good debate apart from the contributions from Deputy McNamara, which goes without saying.

I have already reminded the House about how mindful we still need to be of the precariousness of this disease. It is not one that lends itself to being easily controlled and managed. As a result, a response to the disease that is agile and flexible, with the ability to pivot rapidly and respond to any emerging threat, needs to be ensured. The approval of these resolutions by the House today recognises that we are still in a global pandemic. We will never forget that over 5,000 of our fellow citizens in this State have already died from Covid. The Delta variant is highly transmissible so we must continue to remain vigilant throughout the pandemic. Therefore, for the moment, we need to have some safeguards at our disposal in case we need to act quickly in the event of further threats and challenges from Covid-19.

I would like to recognise that Labour Party Deputies and others are going to vote in support of the motion. I would, however, like to call out the position of Sinn Féin and some of the others. I believe that voting against an extension of these powers for three months, given the current situation, is reckless. I would like to say why. This evening, the number of cases that will be announced will be in excess of 3,700. We are aware of a very significant increase in cases across all age groups. Indeed, the current case prevalence is higher than at any point other than the very highest peak, in January.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: On a point of order, it is very wrong that a Minister would stand up here and say that other people, because they are voting in a different way than he wants, are reckless.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to co-operate.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: How could that be democratic?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Chair cannot allow a Minister to get away with saying that because we are not going to line up in a row obediently behind him like little ducks and support what he is saying, we are engaging in reckless behaviour. That is completely wrong.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask Deputy Michael Healy-Rae-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: That is not democracy. That is completely undemocratic.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----to have a little respect for the Chair.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I do, 100%, as the Leas-Cheann Comhairle knows, but I am asking the Minister to withdraw his remark.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is enough.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: A Minister cannot accuse us of being reckless in advance of our vote.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am now standing up.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is wrong.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy not to interrupt-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: That does not happen. A Minister does not accuse people of being reckless in advance of their vote. That is outrageous.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This is absolutely disrespectful of the democratic-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is disrespectful for the Minister to accuse us of being reckless.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is showing absolute disrespect for the Chair and the democratic process. I am going to resume the debate and allow the Minister to continue uninterrupted.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I do believe it is reckless, and I-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: That is wrong.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: -----say that with respect for my colleagues.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Every man is entitled to his opinion, and we are elected by people too.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could the Minister please resume? The time is running out.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: This evening, more than 3,700 cases are going to be announced. We have hospitals that are getting fuller with Covid patients. As a result of this, and a result of people-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: -----having to go into intensive care units, elective surgery for other men, women and children is being cancelled. The situation right now is serious. When I introduced this legislation some time ago, many in the Opposition asked that the rolling nature of the extensions be changed. I introduced a substantial amendment having listened very carefully to their contributions. I introduced a substantial amendment to allow for just one roll-over. This is it. Sinn Féin and some others in the Opposition, having secured the amendment, with which I agreed, are now voting against even that one roll-over. Let us think about this for a second. We stand up in this House and say we care about healthcare workers but many Members are going to vote against the measures that would protect them. We stand up and say we need the Covid pass in place but many will vote against the very thing required to keep it in place. That is the reality. We all care. I know we all care about our healthcare system and our healthcare workers but our healthcare workers need legislative protection. Men and women in this country who could die from Covid need legislative protection. To have the ability to keep open our economy and the very pubs and restaurants the Deputies are talking about, we need regulations in place. What this motion is about is allowing those regulations to continue to apply for the next three months. I appreciate that none of this is easy. None of us wants to be having this debate about these regulations but they are important. They are saving lives and protecting healthcare workers and our hospitals. They are allowing businesses to remain open. Without these regulations, which many Members of the Opposition said they will vote against,

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even though they are for just three months – we should remember that at the end of the three months, there will not be another roll-over and legislation will be required-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: How many times did the Minister say that?

Deputy Michael McNamara: We have heard it all before.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: -----all the Government is asking-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Could I take a little more time because there were many interruptions?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There were interruptions on both sides.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: There were not. I cannot interrupt while I am speaking.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The Minister interrupted me.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could the Minister finish?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: All we are asking for is agreement to roll these regulations over for three months, after which new legislation will be required, to protect our healthcare system, men, women and children who are vulnerable to this virus, and our healthcare workers.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I understand it is unprecedented but I feel the need-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The Minister accused me of telling lies. I referred to a report on a study carried out in the UK.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: It was not a lie. I would like the Minister to retract his statement.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The debate has concluded.

Deputy Verona Murphy: What I referred to is not anti-vax in any shape or form.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is.

Deputy Verona Murphy: It is a fact.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The debate has concluded. If either side is to start a back-and-forth, it will not be very helpful.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The Minister should be more responsible.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The debate has concluded. The Members should bear with me because there are three motions and three amendments.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We want to call a vote.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are three motions and three amendments. With the

Members' co-operation-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We are calling a vote.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: With the Deputy's co-operation, we are going to see whether a vote emerges. Let us go through the process.

Amendment put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A vote has been called. It will be taken tomorrow night at the usual time.

Extension of Criminal Justice (Enforcement Powers) (Covid-19) Act 2020: Motion

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I move:

That Dáil Éireann resolves that the Criminal Justice (Enforcement Powers) (Covid-19) Act 2020 (No. 14 of 2020) shall continue in operation for the period beginning on the 10th day of November, 2021 and ending on the 9th day of February, 2022.

Question put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A vote has been called and will be taken at the voting time tomorrow night.

Extension of Health (Amendment) Act 2020: Motion

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I move:

That Dáil Éireann resolves that the Health (Amendment) Act 2020 (No. 19 of 2020) shall continue in operation for the period beginning on the 10th day of November, 2021 and ending on the 9th day of February, 2022.

Question put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A vote has been called and will be taken tomorrow night.

Sitting suspended at 5.32 p.m. and resumed at 5.37 p.m.

Nurses and Midwives: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy David Cullinane: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

— the trojan work and sacrifice of healthcare workers during the Covid-19 pandemic;

— that there have been 28,912 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in healthcare workers, with nearly 400 infections in the last month in nurses and midwives alone;

— that healthcare workers, particularly frontline patient-facing staff, have been overworked since before the pandemic, and have reached a point of exhaustion beyond burnout;

— that there is significant evidence of waning vaccine protection after 6 months and that healthcare workers were mainly vaccinated with AstraZeneca nearly a year ago; and

— the need to ensure fair treatment, protection and support for healthcare workers as they face into yet another difficult winter, with added strain from chronic hospital overcrowding and emergency department overflows;

further notes that:

— the Department of Health has yet to publish or act on the independent review of clinical placement allowances for student nurses and student midwives, conducted by Sean McHugh (McHugh Review); and

— prolonged inaction on waiting lists and workplace disputes, including, but not limited to, pay, and particularly in terms of battling for personal protective equipment, air hygiene in the workspace, long hours, and constraints on in-sourcing and supporting staff, along with understaffing and underinvestment, have contributed significantly to low morale and moral injury in the health service; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately begin offering a Covid-19 booster vaccine to healthcare workers and frontline staff;

— publish and act on the McHugh Review, and pay a fair allowance to student nurses and midwives for the work that they do;

— waive the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland registration and retention fees which are coming due;

— engage meaningfully and positively with health and social care trade unions in a spirit of generosity, to deliver recognition of their particular sacrifice during the Covid-19 pandemic;

— publish and implement a fully costed and timelined delivery plan to reach safe staffing levels with improved staff-to-patient ratios, realise the commitments of the framework on staffing and skill mix, and implement real measures which will retain our valued healthcare workers and provide higher quality and safer healthcare; and

— ramp up mental health supports for healthcare workers.

I am sharing time with colleagues. I am proud to be proposing the motion. I am calling on the Minister, first and foremost, to publish immediately the McHugh review on pay and allowances for student nurses and midwives. Whatever the decision of the Minister, the student nurses and midwives who were outside the gates of Leinster House earlier today deserve to know what is in the report.

I welcome the measures for fourth year interns announced through *The Irish Times* but the manner in which that was announced is disappointing to say the least. I have met representatives of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, the Psychiatric Nurses Association, PNA, and SIPTU, and they are all very angry and disappointed that there was no direct engagement with the Minister and the HSE regarding the McHugh report and the contents of the memorandum he intends to bring to the Cabinet. As usual with this Government, the information ends up in *The Irish Times* or elsewhere in the media before those who are affected by this hear about it. This is an industrial relations issue. It is a show of bad faith and it affects the student nurses and midwives who are part of the defence against Covid that the House discussed earlier but have been treated so badly.

From what I have read, I am concerned that there is no real detail regarding first, second and third year student nurses and midwives and their unpaid clinical placement. It seems that the emergency €1 payment will continue for a bit longer, but there is a need for more detail in respect of what exactly will be put in place on a permanent basis for those first, second and third year students. It has to be real and substantial because they have rent to pay and other living expenses just like everybody else and they need to be properly supported as they work in hospitals as part of their placement and in their training. There is a responsibility on the Minister to ensure that all student nurses and midwives are paid a fair allowance. I call on him to act on this urgently, as actions speak louder than words. The issue of payments for student nurses is a litmus test for this Government's recognition of the contribution of those who worked in our healthcare system throughout the pandemic. I have met many of them, in fact, hundreds of them, over the course of the last number of months. What really concerns me is how undervalued they feel. I do not know if the Minister appreciates that or if he has engaged with them to the same level. It is really frightening, at a time when we know that we have to recruit and retain staff in our health service, that young people are coming through training, doing placements in hospitals and feeling so undervalued and under-appreciated to the point that many of them are telling me they will not stay - they will leave the first chance they get. My message to them is not to leave and to stay, because we need them in our public healthcare system. If the Minister is sending the same message to them, he needs to underpin it by taking firm and clear action.

I also want to ask the Minister about the recognition payment for front-line workers that we heard so much about. It was an issue that was brought up before the budget. The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste were talking about it. It was expanding by the day and the minute. Every time a Minister spoke, it was announced that more people would get it and more public sector workers would be covered. Those on the front line were certainly led to believe that something would happen. It did not happen before the budget. There was then an expectation that something would be announced in the budget. Of course, the budget came and went and there was no announcement of a recognition, bonus or payment. Since then, over the last number of weeks, I have not heard a peep from the Government. For all of the speculation, the talk and the mixed messages that came from some members of the Government, it is as if the issue fell off a cliff and nobody has heard about it since. That must be dealt with. The WRC has stated that the Minister

and the Government needs to engage with it to resolve the issue.

My final point relates to safe staffing levels in our hospitals. It is an area of work that I want to support over the next while. I am engaging with healthcare trade unions, training bodies and others to ensure that my response in this area is fit for purpose. We must put in place the strongest and most robust policies and clearly think out how it is that we are going to recruit, train and retain more nurses, GPs, doctors and consultants. We must do that to ensure we have safe staffing levels. We do not have enough GPs, there are still far too many vacant consultant posts and there are many nurses who are telling me that they are going to leave the profession. We need a proper strategic workforce planning strategy that is underpinned by the need to train staff more and also to value them more and treat them better. We must tell them that the Irish public health service we want to build is going to be a world-class one and also one that we want them to come and work in. We must tell them that we value them and want them. That is the message they should hear from the Minister and the Government.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Throughout the worst period of the pandemic, when uncertainty reigned and before so many of us got the vaccine, our hospitals were the front line in the battle against the virus. Healthcare workers, nurses and midwives came in to work day after day, shift after shift, putting themselves at real risk of contracting the virus. They were very tough times for our healthcare workers and their families. Since the widespread uptake of the vaccine, we have seen immense overcrowding return to our hospitals. The pandemic remains, but as restrictions are being relaxed, inevitably, we are seeing an increase in hospital presentations. An overcrowded hospital is a Petri dish for infections.

While our healthcare workers have been vaccinated, we need to ensure they are given every possible protection against this debilitating virus. I welcome the announcement made last night that these key workers are in line to receive a booster vaccination. It is an important first step in protecting our healthcare workers. Beyond that, we need to start delivering better working conditions. It is not acceptable for our nurses and other staff, such as porters and cleaners, to be working in overcrowded hospitals. It is not acceptable that nurses and other staff in my local hospital, University Hospital Limerick, are reluctant to take annual leave, as they fear there is not enough staff to cover for them when they are off. It is not good enough that we put such a burden on student nurses without paying them adequately for the important work they have done. I am pleased to see that there will be some movement on this issue. However, more clarity is definitely needed. The McHugh report remained unpublished and unacted on for too long. When the student nurses saw patients in distress, they acted. When there were healthcare workers absent due to Covid, the student nurses stepped up. Reports suggest that the Government will act in relation to fourth year student nurses, but there is no suggestion that similar action will be taken in respect to those in the first to third years of their studies. We need clarity from the Government and a timetable for when recognition will be offered to some of our student nurses.

The large number of healthcare workers who have been out of work due to coronavirus illness is stark. Others continue to battle with the long-term impact of the virus on their bodies. Worryingly, the level of infections is increasing across the State.

In the time that is left, I wish to raise the issue of overcrowding, which is a massive problem in my own local hospital. There were 75 people on trolleys there today. The conditions of overcrowding are unbelievable. Last week, I spoke to officials at University Hospital Limerick with my colleague, Deputy Cullinane. They are concerned about the huge number of presenta-

tions to the emergency department, which has increased by 22% since 2019. I ask the Minister to intervene personally.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Why would someone who is not working be asked to do a 12-hour shift, unless they really are working? The fact is that students plug the gaps left by a failure to invest in staffing levels. Political pressure played a key role at the beginning of the summer in securing just €100 a week to pay student nurses for the work they did during the pandemic. I wish to commend all of the students who have tirelessly campaigned, and the INMO and the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, for the work they have done on this issue.

I met with two nurses from Limerick today who described the work they do. They told me that they are not allowed to work in other healthcare settings due to fears of cross-contamination and described how they have been driven into poverty by the high fees they have to pay and the high costs involved in qualifying as a nurse. I thought one of the slogans I saw today summed it all up. It read: “Why are nurses priceless, but penniless?”. We must value our nurses. They have earned that.

On top of that, the WHO has warned of a global shortage of nurses that could impact on our ability to rely on international recruitment. We must ensure that we train and retrain as many nurses as possible into the future. Key to that is how we treat and respect nurses and midwives. That must start with students. We not only need to provide a fair allowance for student nurses; we also need to increase the number of places available for people who want to study nursing. The Government needs to join the dots on the nursing shortages and the lack of places available in colleges for young people.

There is an alarming lack of planning and forward thinking. It is testament to our young people that each year, over 5,000 leaving certificate students pick nursing or midwifery as their first preference on the CAO form, yet, we can only accommodate around 2,000. We have both a need and demand for these courses and places. Sinn Féin has been calling on the Government to increase the number of places available by 250 this year and to continue to increase the numbers until we reach 2,500 annual new entrants.

Almost 4,000 students enrol in pre-nursing courses every year, but less than 5% of them get access to a degree course in nursing. Sinn Féin would also ensure that a larger number of these places are reserved for students in pre-nursing levels in the State, and that nurses have a clear educational and career path. There are many areas that need to be addressed.

Deputy Pa Daly: I support this motion. The thing that strikes me most when I speak to nurses is how undervalued they feel. Is it any wonder? There are staff shortages. Nurses are exhausted and stressed and did not receive childcare support at the beginning of the pandemic when they were crying out for it. They did not have access to support staff in pharmacies, adequate security, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, or even adequate catering. Some that I spoke to were just told to get on with it.

There seems to be no strategic vision and strategy in the hospital groups. This can clearly be demonstrated in the example of a haematologist, recently employed in University Hospital Kerry, who was not even supplied with a microscope when he started work. Essential services must be kept, but you can only centralise so much. I ask the Minister to listen to what the nurses are saying. The consultants in University Hospital Kerry, in an unprecedented move, wrote a five-page letter to the South/South West Hospital Group demanding change in the hospital. Too

many nurses are doing non-nursing duties.

I ask the Minister to employ more nurses and keep the existing staff that have been there for many years by valuing them. I ask the Minister to be flexible with those who want to work, but want to work fewer hours. We must build isolation rooms, more beds and wards, cath labs and an oncology unit at the hospital. Having just four nurses in a 30-bed ward is unsafe. If the Minister cannot do any of this, will he at least get them a proper staffroom and changing rooms? The current situation is unsafe.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: When people clapped for front-line workers, including student nurses and midwives, that clap did not pay a bill, it did not pay for a crèche and it did not pay the rent. That public display of support must be reflected by the Government in meaningful pay and allowances. The payment for student nurses and midwives will be the litmus test of the Minister. The contribution they made and continue to make as we work our way through Covid must be acknowledged and reflected by the Government. It also tells us on whose side the Government is standing. While words matter, actions speak louder than any word ever will.

Earlier, I spoke with student nurses and midwives outside. What they told me was difficult to hear. They told me that they are tired, frustrated and exhausted and that they do not feel heard, valued or supported. More frighteningly, they told me they are thinking of leaving the country. Student nurses and midwives have been waiting for far too long for this recognition. We have tabled this motion to ensure the Government stops the vague promises and delivers for student nurses and midwives. We will need them when they are fully trained. We cannot have a haemorrhage of these valued workers out of the country. There can be no further delays and no further excuses. It is time to stop with the lip service and put in place what these workers need to ensure they will be assets in our health service in the future.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The debt of gratitude we owe our front-line healthcare workers is immeasurable. The sacrifices made were immense and the cost has been great. These are people who went into work at a time of great danger, not knowing what they might be exposed to or bring home to their families. This was all done against the backdrop of understaffing and underinvestment by successive Governments, leading to low morale in the health service.

Almost 30,000 healthcare workers have contracted Covid-19 in their attempts to help those afflicted by the virus. There have been almost 400 infections in the past month among nurses and midwives alone. The Government must begin offering booster vaccinations to healthcare workers immediately. It has been more than six months since many healthcare workers receive their vaccinations and they may have fallen outside the window of effectiveness. We must offer the highest level of protection to those fighting on the front lines. It is the very least we can do. We must also look at how we can recognise particular work and sacrifices of our front-line healthcare workers. We should waive the NMBI registration and retention fees, which are due soon. As a matter of principle, we must pay a fair allowance to student nurses and midwives for the work they do. A fair day's pay for a day's work must apply to all.

Staff have been overworked since before the pandemic and have reached a point of exhaustion beyond burnout. As a matter of urgency, the physical and mental health supports for healthcare workers must be ramped up. With hundreds of nurses suffering the lingering effects of long Covid, a pat on the back and a cheery congratulation is insulting and adds to their frustration. The Government is not taking long Covid seriously. As other countries have moved forward with supports for those who are left with long-term symptoms such as chronic fatigue,

pain and the loss of lung function, the HSE still talks around it. By not saying it out loud, does it think that nurses who can hardly climb a flight of stairs or are losing their hair will somehow get better? At a minimum we need to put in place a clinical definition of “long Covid” and put in place proactive measures to support sufferers in the medium and long term.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, which is about delivering fairness to young nurses and midwives in our hospitals and improving staff-patient ratios. Sinn Féin wants our front-line healthcare workers to be recognised for the contribution they have made, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. The motion calls for student nurses and midwives to receive fair pay allowances immediately and for the Government to engage meaningfully with the health and social care trade unions to deliver on pay and conditions.

Nurses and midwives deliver incredible front-line services in very difficult conditions. Only two weeks ago, along with Deputy Cullinane, I met the management of Portlaoise hospital and nurses’ unions to discuss access to care and chronic overcapacity in the hospital. Unfortunately, this is mirrored throughout the State. Covid admissions at Portlaoise hospital doubled between 1 October and 1 November. Capacity issues are causing serious and severe problems in service provision. They are also putting a lot of pressure on staff. This is impacting negatively on retention because of staff burnout, overwork, long shifts and few breaks. Nurses will go elsewhere, unfortunately. According to the HSE’s website, no ICU or HDU beds were available at Portlaoise hospital on 1 November. There were no free beds in those units. There were also no ICU or HDU beds available in Tullamore hospital. In fact, Portlaoise hospital’s ICU was at full capacity for all of October except for four days. There were only four days when there was spare capacity in the ICU.

Hospitals in the midlands are operating at 100% occupancy much of the time. Some of them are operating at slightly over this. We have to address this. There is a range of worrying statistics. A range of reports, including the 2018 Sláintecare health service review, recommend capacity of 80%. My understanding is that 80% capacity is an internationally recognised figure throughout the OECD. We should be at approximately 80% hospital capacity and there should always be that much slack. We are one of the highest spending countries *per capita* in the OECD on healthcare. Therefore, it is very frustrating that consecutive Governments have failed to address the chronic capacity issues. Sinn Féin wants to deliver a healthcare system that works for patients and a system in which nurses and midwives can build careers and have a future. To do this we need fair pay for student nurses and midwives and adequate hospital capacity.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I very much welcome the opportunity to address the House on the motion. I thank the Deputies for tabling the motion, which the Government will not oppose. I would like to take this opportunity, as I am sure we all do, to thank nurses and midwives, including students, and all healthcare workers for their ongoing dedication, commitment and professionalism as we continue to deal with Covid-19. I meet many nurses, midwives and students, and many other healthcare workers throughout our healthcare system, on a regular basis. Many of them are tired. Many of them have had a difficult time. We have to do everything we can to support our healthcare workers. At the same time, while many are tired, they also discuss a sense of immense pride in the work they have done and the work their colleagues have done, and in how our healthcare community has stepped up in the face of the biggest healthcare crisis and challenge we have faced in living memory. The Government is committed to recognising the dedication that front-line healthcare workers have shown during the pandemic. Work is ongoing to determine how best this can be done.

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The contribution of our nurses and midwives, and our student nurses and midwives while on clinical placements, has been, and continues to be, exceptional. Student placements in hospitals are a feature of training and education across a range of disciplines in the health sector. The placements give students practical experience to meet the educational and regulatory requirements of the programmes and ensure they are in a better position to get jobs after graduation. Clinical placements are a necessary part of the degree programme for nurses and midwives who gain invaluable practical experience and develop their clinical skills. Of course, part of the result of this is that our graduates are sought all over the world because of the quality of the training they have had and the degree programmes they have come through.

6 o'clock

As many of the Members here will know, we have introduced a number of measures to help support our student nurses and midwives during the pandemic. First, we ensured they could access the pandemic unemployment payment if they ceased part-time work in, for example, a nursing home or another healthcare facility because of infection prevention and control considerations. This was a special exemption for student nurses and midwives.

I commissioned a report from Professor Tom Collins who recommended a specific pandemic payment grant of €100 per week of supernumerary placement. There was an option put in place also to backdate that to the start of last year's academic term in September.

Following the completion of the Short-Term Review of Clinical Placement Allowances for Student Nurses and Midwives by Professor Tom Collins, the Collins Report, in December 2020, a longer-term independent review was commissioned to examine multiple issues as follows: first, the existing clinical placement allowances payable to student nurses and midwives on supernumerary clinical placement for first, second and third years; second, the pandemic placement grant as specified in Professor Collins's report; and third, pay for fourth year nurses and midwives on the paid internship placement. Mr. Seán McHugh was appointed to carry out this independent review. He invited submissions from a number of stakeholders, including the HSE, higher education institutes and students. I was pleased to receive a report on this matter from Mr. McHugh and my officials and I have completed our review of his report. I agree with his recommendation to increase the pay of interns. I intend to extend payment of the pandemic placement grant. I will also be supporting additional recommendations that were made in the report and will be requesting Cabinet approval for increased financial supports to this end.

Covid-19 brought a range of serious challenges to our nation and to our health service in respect of capacity and staffing. We have worked hard to increase both in order to respond to the pandemic and to deliver a better resourced health service for the future. Both budgets 2021 and 2022 provide very significant amounts of funding for a large, permanent expansion of the health service workforce.

This year, we have recruited an additional 4,462 staff so far, including many more nurses and midwives. The year-to-date whole-time-equivalent growth for 2021 is the second largest increase since the foundation of the HSE, the largest increase being last year. The Department and the HSE deserve great credit for achieving this during a pandemic. Budget 2022 continues the significant investment in the health sector workforce, with funding for an estimated 141,491 full-time staff to be in place at the end of 2022. This would be a further increase of 10,855 from the current staffing numbers, equating to an increase of 8%.

I am acutely aware of the impact that the recent Covid-19 surge is having on our health service, on our patients and, of course, on our healthcare workers. I know that many of our healthcare workers were increasingly concerned about the waning immunity of the vaccines. I was very pleased to authorise yesterday evening the roll-out of booster vaccines to approximately 300,000 healthcare workers. I received updated recommendations from the National Immunisation Advisory Committee, which recommended that a booster dose of an mRNA vaccine is offered to healthcare workers who have completed a primary vaccination course of any Covid-19 vaccine. The additional vaccination of healthcare workers will further protect them and, in turn, the vulnerable patients under their care. Reducing the level of breakthrough infections among healthcare workers will help ensure the continuity of healthcare services particularly during the winter, which have been seriously curtailed by higher rates of transmission of this virus and the pressure that Covid-19 is putting on our entire healthcare system.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are focusing on improving access to elective care in order to reduce waiting times for patients. These plans include funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “see and treat” services where minor procedures are provided at the same time as outpatient consultations, providing virtual clinics, increasing capacity in the public hospital system, as well as increased use of the private system.

We have a budget of €350 million available to support vital initiatives to help us to address the waiting lists. These have disimproved during the pandemic but, let us be clear, they were unacceptably high for a long time before Covid-19 arrived here. This causes great stress and anxiety for patients and their families, as well as the healthcare staff who are trying to care for them in what are sometimes suboptimal conditions.

I also acknowledge the distress overcrowded emergency departments are also causing to patients, to their families and to frontline staff who are working in very challenging conditions in hospitals throughout the country. I thank all of our frontline workers for their ongoing work and professionalism. I recognise that this winter will be a difficult one for patients, for their families, for our health system and for our healthcare workers.

The Government has funded significant initiatives across the health service in the acute, community care and primary care sectors to reduce demand on emergency care by providing alternative care pathways outside the acute sector, additional capacity within the acute sector and additional discharge options in the community sector for patients who were admitted through emergency.

The winter plan will provide for the appropriate, safe and timely care of patients by ensuring, insofar as possible, that effective levels of capacity and resources are in place to meet the expected growth in activity levels.

In conclusion, I want to state that I do not underestimate the difficulty that nurses and midwives and their healthcare colleagues have experienced throughout the course of the pandemic. Without question it has been a difficult and often brutal time. In conjunction with the HSE, the higher education institutes, the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, NMBI, and clinical partners, my Department and I will continue to focus on keeping our nurses, midwives and their colleagues safe.

I will have to leave before the end of the debate for a meeting on epidemiology and the

Minister of State, Deputy Butler, will be here for the wrap-up on behalf of the Government. Gabhaim buíochas.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Carthy is sharing with his colleagues, Deputies Mitchell, Brady and Munster.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Gabhaim buíochas. Because this motion is about priorities, I was reminded today that since my election for the first time to this House in February 2020, on three different occasions I have had to sign a form to tell the Houses of the Oireachtas that I was not accepting a pay rise that I had never asked for and that I did not need. On the same number of occasions, three times, this House has debated motions in respect of providing proper remuneration for our student nurses and midwives and on three occasions the Government has failed to act.

This Chamber clapped in unison at the height of the pandemic in recognition, in solidarity and in appreciation of our frontline workers. Actions, however, speak louder than words. The actions that needed to follow were that we recognised that the pandemic, above all else, exposed deficiencies which go to the core of our health services. Unfortunately, rather than the pandemic being used as a vehicle to undo those deficiencies, it is now the excuse for those deficiencies remaining in place.

When we talk about the difficulties in capacity, the pandemic is the reason, despite the fact that in the Minister's budget this year there was not a single additional acute hospital or community bed delivered above what had already been committed to, which is approximately one half of the intensive care unit, ICU, beds that are actually required. Nothing from the Minister's party, since the Minister has taken over this Department, has been provided for the rebuilding of our smaller hospitals such as Monaghan Hospital, despite pre-election commitments from his party that he would ensure that that would be the case. To my mind, the very fact that we are again debating a motion in respect of our student nurses and midwives shows me that the Government has still not got that issue sorted on behalf of those people who stood by us through some of our darkest days. This tells me quite clearly that what is needed here is not just a shift in policy emphasis but a change in government. I firmly believe that these issues will only be adequately addressed when we have someone such as Deputy Cullinane in the Minister's office. I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion. We are facing into another winter in which our hospitals will be overrun and the reality of the Covid crisis must be faced. We need to start getting vaccine boosters to front-line staff. I welcome the announcement in that regard by the Minister last night. Healthcare workers must be protected. He will be judged on his actions in the next few weeks and he needs to deliver on the commitments given.

Student nurses have been promised the sun, moon and stars by the Government. The Minister has been saying all the right things about improving their pay and conditions but, as always, action speaks louder than words. In fact, he has sat on his hands and delayed improvements for student nurses at every opportunity. They are all too aware that they are not the top priority, but the Government is making sure there is no doubt left in their minds in that regard. We are calling for the publication of the McHugh review, which has been sitting on the Minister's desk for weeks. It is time that report was made public. There is much talk about bringing proposals to Cabinet this week. However, looking at what was leaked to the media today, those propos-

als will not come close to meeting student nurses' requests, particularly for first-, second- and third-year students. It is a pity the Minister did not engage with their unions on these matters.

The current situation is completely unfair and it has gone on for far too long. Student nurses deserve fair allowances that reflect the hard work they do to keep our hospitals moving. This applies to all student nurses, not just those in their final year. Anything short of an improvement for all of them is unacceptable. I hope the Minister will see sense on this.

Deputy John Brady: Over the past 20 months or thereabouts, countless student nurses and midwives were sent into harm's way, alongside all our front-line workers, to fight the pandemic that came to our shores. There have been almost 29,000 Covid cases among healthcare workers and a large number made the ultimate sacrifice in defence of their communities. My family and I have felt the full impact of this. My daughter, who is a student nurse, contracted Covid while on placement and brought it into our home, which wreaked devastation throughout the household. My father-in-law, her grandfather, ended up in ICU and it was only due to the heroic action of healthcare workers in St. Vincent's University Hospital that his life was saved, for which we are eternally grateful.

Every country in the world wants to hire Irish nurses, yet the Minister seems to be doing his best to give them a one-way ticket abroad and push them towards a life of eternal servitude in foreign lands. Many of them are left wondering why they are deemed priceless yet forced to remain penniless. In what can only be described as a cynical attempt to deflect from the Government's indifference to the welfare of student nurses and midwives, the Minister offered them a paltry €100 earlier this year. He also agreed to a more long-term review of payments to student nurses on clinical placement, which was to be led by Sean McHugh. Those recommendations were to go to the Minister in June, in the hope that they would be in place for the current academic year. However, the report has been sitting on his desk since 12 August and only parts of it have been seen by a select few journalists, not by those who made contributions to, and took part in, the review.

The Minister must publish that report immediately. He needs to pay a fair allowance to student nurses and midwives for the work they do. When he says he is not going to oppose this motion, that does not mean he should do nothing; it means he must implement the contents of the report. He has been found out and he will continue to be found out if he persists in sitting on his hands and failing our health service and our student nurses and midwives.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Healthcare staff have done Trojan work since Covid first hit and their contribution can never be quantified. The entire country owes them a debt of gratitude. Their hard work and dedication got us through this crisis and they continue to carry out that work in exceptionally difficult circumstances. Levels of burnout and exhaustion are at an all-time high as healthcare workers face into another long, hard winter. Public hospitals are under enormous pressure, with personnel working in conditions of staff shortages, long working hours and low morale.

Working conditions were difficult in the public health service long before this crisis. Underinvestment in the healthcare system has meant overcrowding, waiting lists and enormous workloads for many years. There has been inaction on waiting lists, which are at their worst-ever levels, with 900,000 people waiting for treatment. When the CEO of the HSE appeared before the Committee of Public Accounts some weeks ago, I asked him what the chances were of that figure reaching 1 million by Christmas or shortly thereafter. He could not say it would

not happen. This is an appalling legacy after ten years of Fine Gael in government, with Fianna Fáil propping it up previously and now working with it in government.

There is also inaction on workplace disputes, including pay, access to personal protective equipment, PPE, proper air hygiene in the workplace, long working hours and understaffing. Every day, we hear about the difficulties for nurses. I sometimes wonder whether members of the Government ever stop to think about the work our healthcare staff have done and continue to do. Does the Minister ever stop for a moment and consider that he is in a position to put this right by standing by the workers who have looked after us right through the pandemic and continue to do so under enormous pressure? Does he never say to himself that he will move mountains to give those staff, including nurses, student nurses and midwives, the fair pay allowance they deserve? Does he never once resolve to do all that is necessary to relieve the pressure they are under? I can only imagine that if Deputy Cullinane were in the Minister's chair, he would start at it straight away and we would not have staff having to leave busy shifts and come up to Leinster House to picket and beg for a fair pay allowance. It is a disgrace.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I am finding it hard to separate the two debates taking place today in the House, namely, this one and the one we had before it. It is like an old-fashioned revue, where we had the first act, the actors went off for a short interval and now they have come back and taken up different parts. I cannot understand how any proposer of this motion, which is an excellent motion in itself that is supportive of student nurses and midwives and other healthcare workers, could vehemently oppose the extension of emergency powers on a day when case numbers are at 3,700.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I have been sitting here for the past 30 minutes listening to the debate and wondering how that can be the case.

When this is boiled down, why exactly are these emergency powers being introduced? They are not politically popular; nobody likes them or wants to support them. Why, then, are they being extended? Their extension is happening because the case numbers are five times higher than they were this day last year, when we had 748 cases. We are heading into an uncertain winter, with 90% of people aged over 12 vaccinated and 3,700 cases. The one thing we have learned about this pandemic is that when case numbers rise, hospitalisations and ICU admissions follow. The emergency powers, at their essence, are certainly not designed to make the Government popular or help businesses and workers, to whom they are damaging; they are designed to ease pressure on our health services. Ultimately, if they have to be used, they are designed to save lives. They are also designed to help student nurses and midwives by easing the pressure on the wards on which they work. Listening to what has been going on for the past couple of hours in the previous debate and this one, it is so inconsistent because what is written in this motion-----

Deputy David Cullinane: That is because the Deputy did not listen to a word we said.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I have listened; I have listened to the entire debate. The Deputy can respond to me later.

Deputy David Cullinane: I will respond later.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It is the Deputy's motion and I am sure he will respond. This is my

contribution. This is a very good motion because it speaks to what-----

Deputy David Cullinane: The Deputy has not spoken to it yet.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I am speaking to it now. We are being told that Deputy Cullinane is the greatest health Minister in waiting, so he is setting himself up for a major fall. If he cannot get through the past couple of hours with any consistency, I wonder how he will get through a term as a Minister for Health.

It is 11 months since Senator Annie Hoey of the Labour Party presented a Bill on student nurses' pay. Student nurses and student midwives have been among the lowest in terms of how they have been respected during this pandemic. There is no doubt about that, and that is why this motion is a good stand-alone motion. It speaks to that in a real way. We see the impact it is having from the surveys that have been done for student nurses. The motion refers to "beyond burnout". It is beyond burnout. Some 62% of respondents to the nurses and midwives survey have cared for patients who have died from Covid-19, 91% have felt mentally exhausted when off duty and 97% believe it has had a negative psychological impact on their colleagues. I have been in this House and in the convention centre for the past year and a half and have heard the moaning and cribbing of our colleagues about being housed in a world-class convention centre. Compared to what real workers are doing on the front line of this pandemic, it is embarrassing. It has been embarrassing to be a politician at this time. We are clapping at a time student nurses are not getting paid.

I welcome what the Minister said about the McHugh review, but it is too late. It has been on his desk for a number of months. Everything has taken far too long. The student nurses and midwives who gathered outside the Dáil today are exasperated and exhausted. This is not the first time they have been outside the Dáil. They do not want to be there. They want to be either studying or learning their craft, and they have not been able to do that with the respect that they deserve. That has been a huge regret of this pandemic. We cannot ignore the fact that two thirds of nurses and midwives tell us that they are considering leaving the profession due to the impact of Covid-19. Yesterday, we saw on the television news people arriving through the arrivals gate of Sydney airport. We know what is going to happen if we do not improve the terms and working conditions of healthcare workers, be they nurses, midwives, radiographers or social care workers. They will be going through those arrival halls next year to better paid jobs, career diversity and progression and a quality of life they are not getting here.

These are the fundamentals, and this predates Covid-19. That is just Australia. There are also the Emirates, which are providing large, tax-free wages for these workers. They can go there to work for three or four years and then return. The UK is a more attractive option. Ireland should be the most attractive place for any healthcare worker to work in but, unfortunately, it is the opposite. We have seen what our healthcare workers can do. Ireland is a world leader in its vaccination roll-out. The healthcare workers have been doing that. It is nurses, student nurses, retired nurses and everybody in between who have been vaccinating us and keeping us as safe as possible. There is a fundamental problem that this Government and any future Government will have to tackle.

Regarding the booster vaccine, today's announcement that it will be rolled out is welcome. Again, however, it is weeks too late. Why did NIAC take so long? The science is there. The Minister and I have spoken to clinicians; every spokesperson and Member has been speaking to clinicians and scientists about the efficacy of vaccines. With 3,500 healthcare workers out sick,

the fact that it has taken until 2 November to announce that the booster campaign for healthcare workers is going to continue is frankly unacceptable. We will also have a situation where vaccinators are going to return to facilities such as nursing homes to administer the booster shots, the same facilities they visited in previous weeks to administer it to people over 80 years old and so forth. It is an inefficiency we could have done without.

On the stand-alone motion and the need to show respect to the student workers who were outside the House on this cold November day, it deserves support and implementation.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I welcome the motion, which is timely. It is about time serious consideration was given to the role that nurses have played in this country generally and particularly over the past two years. It is a shocking indictment that nurses have to take to the streets and protest for what they have long been promised and for the recognition they deserve.

I welcome the Minister's announcement that the booster vaccine will be extended to healthcare workers. Like other Members, I do not know why there was a delay in this. It is an obvious move. They should be very much at the top of the queue. Apart from the fact that so many nurses put themselves in danger each day, we know that as a result of their contact with patients with Covid-19 approximately 3,500 healthcare workers are off due to Covid-19 and approximately 10% of those will have the effects of long Covid. The fact that the booster vaccine will be provided to them over the coming weeks will undoubtedly protect them and will also protect the capacity of the health service.

However, I reiterate the point I made earlier that vaccines alone will not protect nurses or healthcare workers generally. I believe we are repeating the mistakes that were made over the past year, whereby all the concentration was put on the vaccine programme. It is fantastic that there was the breakthrough with vaccines and that they were developed so quickly. The roll-out in this country was exceptionally good. However, all the emphasis was put on the vaccination programme, and other measures that could have been put in place more easily and in addition to the programme were more or less overlooked and neglected. To look back at what happened, we were late to adopt the recommendation to wear masks and we were late with regard to antigen testing. Antigen tests were recommended last March and it took a second expert group to recommend them six months later, but we are only starting to use them now in a minor way when other countries have been using them for more than a year on a widespread basis. We have been exceptionally late in recognising that Covid-19 is an airborne virus. I cannot understand why the Government has not acted on this. It has been known since the summer of last year that Covid-19 is an airborne virus. Straightforward measures could have been taken, which would have substantially reduced the spread of Covid-19 but for some unknown reason those measures were not taken.

We are now at a point of facing into the winter with a complete underestimation of the impact of seasonal conditions on the virus. The Minister announced more than 3,700 cases this evening. That figure far exceeds the projections made by NPHEt under the most pessimistic scenario, and it is far earlier than NPHEt predicted any such numbers. It predicted under a pessimistic scenario 2,500 to 3,000 cases per day during November. Today on 2 November, we have far exceeded that prediction. What steps will be taken now to reverse those figures or even to contain them? I am not hearing that from the Minister, nor am I hearing it from NPHEt. Many practical measures could be taken, particularly with ventilation. I cannot understand why the Government is ignoring those. This has been established as good practice in many other countries.

The Government has done the minimal amount in schools by providing CO2 monitors very late in the day. It has refused to provide any kind of air purification systems. Equally, in hospitality there is no requirement to have proper standards of ventilation. In most European countries, hospitality settings are required to display the reading from the CO2 monitor in the front window, and people can choose whether to go into unsafe circumstances.

Last month, people were advised to go back to work in the complete absence of any kind of guidelines or limits in respect of how to measure CO2 levels, how to ensure proper ventilation, and what steps to take when the air is infected and unsafe. I cannot understand why the Government is not doing that and, equally, I cannot understand why it has not adopted antigen testing.

It is great that healthcare workers will get the booster vaccination, but if the Government repeats the mistake of putting all the eggs in the basket of vaccination, this will not work. Unfortunately, we know that vaccinations have disappointed. I fully accept that was not known six months ago. There are breakthroughs. We also know at this point that vaccination does not help to stop transmission.

For nurses and healthcare workers generally, as well as the booster vaccines, steps need to be taken to ensure the air in hospitals, many of which are very old buildings, and other health-care facilities is safe. We need to ensure infected air is dealt with in hospitals particularly, but also in all the other settings I have mentioned.

I ask the Minister to consider arranging urgent briefings for the Opposition on the steps that will be taken. We have not had a briefing for many months and there have hardly been any this year. I appeal to him to bring in the Opposition spokespersons or party leaders and provide a thorough briefing on the plans to deal with the unfolding dire situation.

I repeat the points others made about the enormous impact of Covid highlighted in the IMO survey. The burnout that was common pre-pandemic is now rampant in many healthcare settings. ICU nurses in St. Vincent's hospital report that they are at breaking point due to staff shortages. They are forced to use a baby monitor to watch patients in ICU because they do not have enough staff. Is it any wonder such a high proportion of nurses are saying they intend to emigrate to go to work in healthcare systems that actually work and where governments are serious about reform?

The long-fingering of Sláintecare is a significant factor in this regard. Nurses and other healthcare workers are waiting for reform that has not been delivered and they will lose further confidence in the Irish healthcare system. We were promised more healthcare staff but only a fraction of those have been recruited this year. Nurses feel very unsupported by Government, something we will pay an enormous price for unless it is addressed as a matter of urgency. We need to get to a point where we have safe and adequate staffing levels. We are very far from that at this point. Nurses deserve better, patients deserve better and the public deserves better.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I express our gratitude to those in the nursing profession and healthcare workers who kept us all safe in this terrible time. Those in the nursing profession, not only in Ireland but across the world, have never been as challenged. They lost colleagues in a battle to protect all of us. Over the past 17 to 18 months, many things have changed, some for the good and some for the bad. We have seen how the vocation of nursing has been undervalued in Ireland, especially student nurses. That was exposed last year regarding student nurses in a placement not getting paid. That needs to be addressed immediately or else nurses who are

highly qualified will graduate and leave this country. We do not want that situation. These people are highly motivated and highly skilled and want to work in our health system. However, they are burnt out. Not all nurses want to do that, but a minority want to leave because of pay and conditions.

The Minister can fix that through recognition, respect and remuneration, which is very important for student nurses on work placement. We spoke to them outside the gates of Leinster House today. They are highly motivated and doing an extremely difficult job but they feel they are not being paid for the work they do. All they are asking is that when they are on placement for 18 weeks in second year or third year, they get recognition for travel costs or something. That will go a long way to recognising the profession. The nursing vocation is in its golden age. There has never been so much interest in this country. There is an oversupply of people applying for nursing courses through the CAO, indicating that a large number of people are interested in this. The Government needs to look after them, and once it looks after them, they will look after all of us.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The central issue here is simple. When Covid hit, student nurses and midwives stepped up to the mark and went above and beyond the call of duty in the fight against Covid. Last year, under pressure from student nurses, from the left and from People Before Profit, the Government finally recognised they deserved to be paid and gave them the healthcare assistant rate of €14 an hour. However, then Scrooge-like it took the money back, offering only a pitiful €100 a week support, which is less than €3 an hour. Workers in our hospitals, caring for our families, our friends and perhaps even ourselves, are getting only €3 an hour for it. That is exploitation, pure and simple.

Student nurses and midwives should be paid a living wage for their work. It is the very least they deserve. Today, the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, has announced he will increase it by 12.5%. That is a consequence of the pressure from below because he knew the kinds of crowds that would be in front of Leinster House today demanding proper pay. What about the others? What about the student nurses who are not in fourth year? There is still nothing for them.

That says a lot about the attitude of the Government towards the health service, which is to run it down and on the cheap as opposed to investing in a properly funded national health service. It says a lot about the attitude to those students who do work, which is not just limited to the health service and is across the board. Many students do work and all should be paid for it. Postgraduate researchers should be paid. This also speaks to the general attitude towards workers, paying lip service and empty sorts of thanks for the sacrifices of workers. What is reported is about the meanest thing possible for all workers, which is one bank holiday for one year. Even if we had one extra bank holiday every year we would still be below the European average. It is simply not good enough for all that workers have sacrificed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We are 18 months into the pandemic and it is just under a year since People Before Profit brought the first motion to the Dáil calling for payments to student nurses and midwives because of the incredible work they have done on placement during Covid-19 especially but which they do all the time.

The Government must get this. This is not just about what student nurses and midwives do on placement during the pandemic, although the pandemic highlighted the extent to which they work and help knit together our chronically understaffed and under-resourced health services. The Government had to recognise it with the healthcare assistant rate it provided at the begin-

ning of the pandemic but then it pulled it back. After that they were given an insulting €100 per week. The unions still have not seen the detail of the review that followed, although we are told fourth years will get a bit of a pay increase because they put pressure on the Government, but there will only be a miserable €100 for student nurses and midwives.

This is just not good enough and I am amazed the Minister does not understand it. I spoke to student nurses and midwives at meetings and the demonstration when we were putting together this motion last year. Talking to them, they tell us something very simple. The experience they have as a student means they will probably leave the country. They cannot afford to pay the rent. The €100 is barely covering travel and subsistence costs when they are on placement, if it covers it at all. They cannot work when they are on placement, although they need a job and income to pay the rent. Many of these student nurses have kids and they cannot live on the pittance they are being given.

In Britain they used to pay £15,000 per year to student nurses and midwives. When they withdrew that payment, the number of people going into nursing collapsed. Even British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Tory that he is, had to bring in a bursary of £10,000 for student nurses and midwives to get more people into nursing. The Government is nowhere near what is necessary to keep nurses and midwives in this country and our health service or stop them from emigrating.

Deputy Mick Barry: The best protest placard of the year outside Dáil Éireann was held by a student nurse today. It stated, “Why are nurses priceless but penniless?” It is a brilliant placard.

The Minister has left the room but he needed to read the room because he has got it wrong on student nurses’ pay. He must stop, look and listen and he needs to make some changes. Students are going back into hospitals, working in Covid-19 wards and other wards with Covid-19 patients. The numbers in intensive care units and hospitals will increase. Could they double or treble? Already the system is leaning heavily and relying on those student nurses, and that will increase in the days and weeks ahead.

The Minister proposes to extend the €100 per week payment for first, second and third year student nurses and increase the pay of fourth year interns by 12.5%. That is not enough and it does not take account of the fact these student nurses are wearing personal protective equipment, PPE, or the financial pressures that have come on them on the back of the pandemic. There are students with vulnerable immunocompromised parents or siblings at home who had to move out and pay rent while rental costs are so high, as we know. Some have had to give up a part-time job because they cannot go from working in a Covid-19 ward straight to a part-time job. They do that to protect their workmates.

The payment is €100 per week for those in first, second and third year, which equates to €2.50 per hour or less than a quarter of the minimum wage. It is an insult and these students should be paid the healthcare assistant rate. They were paid that rate at the start of the pandemic and that should be done again now. The other figure is the 12.5% for those in fourth year. The key figure is not 12.5% but 20%, as they are being paid 20% less than first-year qualified nurses. They should be paid the same rate and that should be done now.

This is really a no-brainer and practically everyone in society agrees with the points I make. The people who are completely out of kilter are the Minister and the members of his Govern-

ment. They need to read the room and change the policy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I met a large number of protestors today outside the Dáil and spoke to them about what is happening in the nursing sector, which is absolutely shocking. We in Aontú were one of the first political parties to bring to a discussion the matter of student nurses being properly paid. It is also interesting that the Minister at the time, Deputy Harris, said he would pay them and then reneged on that promise. Now they are being offered a quarter of the minimum wage to work on the front line in very difficult circumstances.

There is also much information coming from today's protest. One point is that there is currently a crisis in the sustainability of nursing in this State. An Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, survey has stated 68% of nurses are considering getting out of the profession as a consequence of the conditions and because of Covid-19. I also understand there are fewer people coming from college into the service than are leaving at the other end. We are getting to a position where we will see a reduction in the numbers of nurses available to fill those jobs.

It reminds me that in education we have concepts such as teacher-student ratios but there are no such ratios for nurses to patients. I remember reading a document a couple of years ago indicating that the more patients a nurse has to deal with, the higher the level of morbidity and mortality in the ward in the question. There is a direct correlation between the number of patients and nurses on a ward. That document was released when Deputy Harris was Minister for Health, which demonstrates the pressure being put on nurses. Their ability to function in that environment is a life and death matter.

I spoke to a large number of student nurses today, including Caitríona, Sonia, Miriam and Mairéad. One of them spoke about how an older man fell in a nursing home, and because he had Covid-19, other staff did not want to pick him up. She told me how she had to pick him from the floor and was the only person willing to do it. Another student nurse told me she had never been present at a death in her life, but when she was a student nurse, she found herself on her own when four people passed away. She was thrown into one of the most difficult and traumatic experiences a person could have, on her own and without anybody to guide her in dealing with that.

I spoke to a number of other individuals, including a lady I will call Mary. She was a nurse manager in a nursing home in the west of the country. In a famous case, all but two of her staff tested positive for the virus one morning. She rang the HSE seeking staff to support her but she did not receive any extra staff for two days. In those two days, the two staff worked for 48 hours on adrenaline. I touched base with Mary months later to see how she was doing and she broke down on the phone. Through tears, she told me she just does not want to do nursing anymore.

My office has also spoken to the whistleblower at St. Mary's nursing home in the Phoenix Park. It was a short conversation because a patient had just had a stroke and an ambulance had been called. She told me she was broken-hearted about what she had witnessed. The next time people are speaking to nurses, midwives or student nurses, they might ask when they last had a holiday or a lunch break. We need to do better on this issue if we are to have a health service that functions in the future, and to do right by the workers in that sector. They are entitled to a decent working environment.

I refer to the nurses in Our Lady's Hospital, Navan, who were out in force at a march this week in Navan. Some 10,000 people took to the streets in what was a cross-community cross-

party rally. I note one political party did not put forward a Deputy to attend, which was Fine Gael. The Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, did not arrive to speak at the rally unfortunately, and that was a major mistake. At present, beds in the accident and emergency department and the ICU are being closed by the HSE at a time when ICU beds are at the front line of the battle against Covid. It is mind-blowing that we are listening to the rhetoric about the need for ICU capacity while at the same time the HSE is looking to close beds. There has been a stay of execution on this, which we welcome. However, it is not good enough that it remains open for just three or four months. I will wrap up with this point: people are waiting 11 hours for ICU and accident and emergency services in Drogheda, yet the Government is looking to close accident and emergency services in Navan. It is important that the Minister of State sends a message to the HSE that this cannot be done. We must keep our accident and emergency services.

Deputy Verona Murphy: We have not resourced our ICUs as we should. We have not expanded ICU capacity as required. Long before Covid we had staff shortages. In key areas of the HSE, beds are closing, corridors are full of patients on trolleys and waiting lists are expanding. The Government has put all its eggs in the vaccination basket and believes so much in the vaccination that it is trying to coerce people to take it. It makes sense, therefore, that the booster shots are offered to the 3,500 nursing staff. I do not suggest that nurses be compelled to take a booster vaccine, as is done in other countries. Instead, it should be offered to those who want to keep our health service show on the road. Offering that would be consistent with Government vaccination policy. It is a pity it took so long to be introduced. In light of the facts presented in this motion, I support the decision to offer the booster programme to nurses, but I equally want the Government to stop the divisive rhetoric against any nurse or, indeed, anyone who decides not to take it.

On a broader level, we must examine why we have issues with recruiting the required number of staff to operate our health services as effectively as possible. First, they must be paid at a level that will encourage our graduates to remain in the country. The working conditions must allow nurses to work effectively without being expected to operate consistently for extended hours in understaffed and overcrowded wards. We must also ensure that pay and conditions match what is on offer with competitors. Otherwise, this will continue to be a problem. With that in mind, the McHugh report needs careful attention. Are we giving our student nurses a good first impression of the Irish health service if we expect them to perform front-line nursing activities without pay? It is as if the current policy is designed to turn nurses off pursuing their careers in our health service.

This weekend, I met a lovely trainee nurse called Sarah, from New Ross, at her uncle's funeral. She raved about nursing. She just loves it and wants to specialise in respiratory nursing. Covid has not put her off this one bit. I was in awe of her enthusiasm. As she spoke, all I could think was that I hope the system does not suck the life out of her. It is clear that nursing is a vocation and not just a job. We should be glad of this because it equates to extra dedication that no amount of money can pay for. Just ask the patients who have been in receipt of such care and attention. This is not an attribute that the Government should take advantage of, but one it should nourish and pay for accordingly.

I have almost lost count of the number of times I have raised staffing issues in the child and adolescent mental health service, CAMHS, facility in Wexford. There have been some improvements, which is obviously welcome, but the fact still remains that the unit is understaffed. It is not fair to blame any individual Minister for this; it has been caused by a long-standing problem of mismanagement and cuts to staff pay and conditions across the board in the health

service. It means that there are parents whose children are not receiving the services when they need to access them. I will continue to ask for this service to be fully staffed until it is. I have raised numerous times the issue of the continued absence of an MRI scanner in Wexford General Hospital, which the people of Wexford generously raised the funds to buy. One excuse given for why it has not been installed yet is that there are staffing issues that need to be addressed. I ask that the staffing issues be addressed to allow the €250,000 which the people of Wexford raised to be used.

I refer to the delivery of a 24-hour cardiac care service in the Minister of State's county at Waterford University Hospital. The funds to ensure the staff are recruited to run the 24-hour cardiac care service have not yet been provided. This service takes care of the 600,000 people in the community healthcare organisation, CHO, department. I do not wish to be dramatic, but each of the issues I have raised can make the difference between life and death.

This motion calls on the Government to ramp up the provision of mental health supports. I am in favour of improved mental health supports for nurses, in what is a stressful and pressurised job. However, while I stand here speaking, a search operation is continuing in the New Ross area for a young man missing since Wednesday, which is devastating for his family. Such situations happen weekly, if not daily, and I want that to end.

An Ceann Comhairle: We now go to the Rural Independent Group where Deputy Michael Collins is sharing time with Deputies Carol Nolan, Richard O'Donoghue, Danny Healy-Rae and Michael Healy-Rae.

Deputy Michael Collins: Nurses and midwives are the cornerstone of our public healthcare system. Therefore, urgent action is needed to resolve this gigantic crisis situation. We are told by nurses who contact us that occupational health services are simply not available nationwide. Nurses report that there are long waiting times for appointments. This situation is a clear indication that our public healthcare system is under-resourced in regard to staffing. We need an urgent and planned funding allocation for the implementation of safe staffing throughout the health service and the introduction of measures to reduce pressure on hospitals. There were 688 patients on trolleys in October in Cork University Hospital. At the start of the pandemic, the HSE stated there would be zero tolerance of overcrowding, but here we are in a situation where our hospitals are no longer just full, but are completely overcrowded. We have not seen a detailed winter plan from the HSE. Winter is no longer a time coming down the tracks; it is already upon us. Having spoken to many doctors in recent months, it has become clear that almost all of them would not be surprised if the number of people on waiting lists increases to well beyond 1 million in the coming months. This indicates that we have little confidence in the approach of the Minister or the HSE in tackling these waiting lists.

There is a lack of chiropody and dental services in towns, with Bantry being without these services for different reasons. The provision of chiropody services for public patients has ceased because the chiropodist who retired has not been replaced as a result of funding issues between the HSE and chiropodists. Dental services are no longer available to public patients either. Bantry is not the only area experiencing these difficulties and it is a matter that must be urgently addressed.

The motion being debated relates to nurses and midwives. We must pay tribute to them for the excellent and hard work they have done with the people and for saving many lives. They deserve our utmost praise in this House.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Our nurses are fantastic; they do great work. We do not need to repeat that over and over again. They do not want a clap on the back, rather they want to be respected and given proper pay and conditions, which is only minimal and right. I support this motion and, in particular, the provision to have the registration and retention fee waived. This must happen because we cannot simply allow the Government to pay lip service. It is a shame the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is no longer in the Chamber, because there are a number of issues I would have liked to raise with him tonight. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for being here. However, there are other issues I would have liked to have raised with the Minister, which I will raise in due course.

On the lack of psychiatric nurses, their recruitment remains stagnant at present. This has a desperate knock-on effect on our mental health services. I was contacted by guardians dealing with a desperate situation involving a teenager who has made several attempts to commit suicide. I do not know how long they are waiting on a plan to be drawn up for this teenager. I do not want to be the person who receives bad news over the phone. Action needs to be taken in this desperate situation.

7 o'clock

There are thousands of those desperate situations around this country and action must be taken. Given that we are speaking on health, I will end by calling on the Minister of State to give certainty to the people of Portlaoise and the wider Laois area that the future of Portlaoise hospital remains safe and secure. The Minister of State needs to give them that certainty. I support the local action group, which has been very vocal on the issue of the hospital. Will the Minister of State confirm that the future of Portlaoise hospital is secure?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: University Hospital Limerick, UHL, recorded the highest number of patients on trolleys in the country for October according to monthly trolley watch figures compiled by the INMO. UHL saw 1,349 patients on trolleys over the month of October and was followed by Letterkenny University Hospital with 943, University Hospital Galway with 829 and Cork University Hospital with 688. UHL has experienced some of the worst overcrowding in recent times with a total of 1,080 people being treated on trolleys. How can we talk about data protection and the general data protection regulation, GDPR, in these conditions?

The only way for the Government to help the nurses is to pay them appropriately. It has spent millions upon millions on hospital buildings but has not invested a penny in the nurses and student nurses. It is a bit like the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who wants everyone to go electric when we have no electricity to run the car. We have nurses who want to nurse and to care for the vulnerable people in this country but all the Government does is hire manager after manager. It should invest the money in the nursing staff. They are the ones who looked after us during the pandemic and who look after us, and everyone in our families, every day. Despite this, the Government came forward with only a small token. It is not good enough. The Government must think outside the box. The engine of this country's hospitals are the nurses. The Government must invest in them and treat them fairly. It must also stop thinking up the out-of-this-world things it comes up with but does not provide backing for. The Government must trust the nurses.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have a chance to talk on this very important motion. I thank Sinn Féin for allowing us to do so. We have to support our nurses. It is very clear that nurses are leaving their places of work every day. On one particular day in Tralee hospital,

six nurses left together. Donie Doody of SIPTU says that we need 100 new nursing posts to be filled in University Hospital Kerry. There has been no elective surgery carried out since the first week of September. Can the Minister of State imagine that? The corridors of Tralee hospital are lined with elderly people who are waiting for two or three days. That is not acceptable. This Government and Deputies here in the Dáil have been praising the nurses but what we must do is pay them properly. They are not being paid properly at present. They should be allowed to register for free. They are being charged €100 to register. What are we doing for them? We are charging them to go to work by charging more carbon tax on the petrol and diesel their cars use. At the same time, the Taoiseach is in Scotland promising €200 million or more. He pulled €200 million out of his pocket yesterday to help with climate change. If he is there *saecula saeculorum*, he will not change the weather or do anything to improve it. We are after having a bad week in Kerry but he will do nothing to improve the weather. On top of that, €200 million or more is promised towards combating climate change for the next ten years while we cannot pay our nurses in Tralee hospital or around the country and yet expect them to work. They are driven down to the ground. Nursing is a vocation. Nurses have to be caring and have to be trained to the last to do the job. Despite this, we will not train them properly.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, personally for her recent trip to Kerry. She made a great impression and was highly regarded personally. She was very welcome and will be welcomed again. If she does as she did the last time and comes with her bags full, we will be delighted to see her.

I thank Sinn Féin sincerely for its excellent motion. I was glad to meet with the young student nurses and other members of the nursing profession who came here today. It is a big ordeal for people to leave their places of work, their families and their homes and to come by car, train or other modes of transport to protest at the Dáil. I welcome them.

In our hospital, University Hospital Kerry, we need 100 nurses. That is a matter of fact. In Kenmare Community Hospital and the district hospitals in Killarney, Cahersiveen, Tralee and Listowel, we need more investment in people. In Killarney, we need a new district hospital which - please God - we will get, but we need more investment not just in bricks and mortar, but in personnel. I will say again what I have said over and over again; one of the most stupid things I ever saw any group of people do was to stand up to praise and applaud the people working in our nursing profession. It was childish nonsensical behaviour. They did not want praise or claps. They want proper recognition and to be shown respect through the remuneration they receive. In other words, they want to be paid properly.

In a very significant move, the consultants in University Hospital Kerry, who are highly regarded people, have written to public representatives to say they have lost confidence in the management of the HSE. I will sit down after saying the following. The Ceann Comhairle often tells us not to mention anyone in a derogatory way and he knows I never would. However, I can do the opposite. I am allowed to. I will be very focused in saying this. There are certain people in HSE South who have done Trojan work. I am not a bit ashamed to acknowledge one particular individual, a gentleman - and I mean a gentleman - by the name of Michael Fitzgerald. He is a very senior officer in the HSE and does Trojan work in our county and beyond. I compliment him and others among the senior staff. I also compliment our nurses, the doctors, the people who keep the thing together and the consultants. We must make a proper effort to do our job right.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thought the Deputy was going to do the litany of the saints.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Fáiltím roimh an deis a bheith páirteach sa díospóireacht seo. Gabhaim buíochas le Sinn Féin. Tá an t-ábhar seo agus an rún seo thar a bheith tábhachtach. Baineann sé le cúrsaí sláinte, le heaspa foirne agus leis an gcrúachas ina bhfuil ár seirbhísí sláinte faoi láthair. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil croí an Aire Stáit san áit cheart agus go bhfuil a dícheall á dhéanamh aici chuile lá. Níl aon amhras faoi sin ach tá géarchéim ann le fada an lá. Ní dóigh liom gurb é “géarchéim” an focal ceart i ndáiríre mar tá sé ann chomh fada sin. Tá sé deacair glacadh leis. Is é sin an fáth go raibh coiste traspháirtí i gceist agus is é sin an fáth gur foilsíodh tuarascáil chun dul i ngleic leis na fadhbanna ar bhonn córasach ionas nach mbeidh muid anseo chuile sheachtain ag gearán faoi chomh dona is atá rudaí ar an talamh. Táim ag smaoinemh ar Ghaillimh agus tiocfaidh mé ar ais go dtí na pointí ginearálta. Inniu, bhí 46 duine ar thralaithe i nGaillimh, Ina measc siúd, bhí 16 páiste. Cúpla lá ó shin, bhí 54 othar ar thralaithe. Níl aon athrú ann ach, b’fhéidir, figiúr beag. Tá an fhadhb chéanna ann lá i ndiaidh lae de bharr na géarchéime atá ann agus de bharr easpa tola ar leibhéal an chórais chun dul i ngleic leis an bhfadhb i mbealach inmharthana, bealach atá tuillte ag gach duine sa tír. Tá sé tuillte againn seirbhís sláinte a bheith againn mar bhuncheart.

I have thanked Sinn Féin and I will not repeat my thanks. It is a very important motion. I look at it in the context of Galway, as we all look at matters in the context of our constituencies when we stand up here, but I will also make some general points. On the very first day I was elected and Independent Members were negotiating for an extra facility in Waterford or Wexford, I made the point that a heartbeat there is equally as important as a heartbeat in Galway and that we are not here to fight our corner. Rather we are here to provide public services, hold the system to account and ensure every single county has the appropriate services.

We are far from that in Galway, even though it is often said we are the centre of excellence for cancer care services. We serve a population of almost 1 million people from Donegal down. We have a system that is creaking at the seams. The previous clinical director in the hospital, whose name escapes me – perhaps it would not be appropriate to name the person in any event – was on the record as saying he could not stand over any more cutbacks because they were simply too dangerous and a threat to patient safety. That person has gone on to different things, but the situation has not changed.

On a general level, we need a proper plan. We have so many problems, assets and solutions that it is sometimes very difficult to make decisions. I am sure the Minister of State finds it difficult, given her hands-on approach. Merlin Park University Hospital comprises 150 acres. We have what I would describe as a higgledy-piggledy development of further services without an overall master plan. One would think we would have learned our lesson from the congested regional site, but we have not. We are still progressing in that manner, notwithstanding the fact I and various colleagues here put pressure on the system in respect of the publication of the options report. We got an options report which recommended a brand new hospital in Merlin Park in Galway. Theoretically, that is a wonderful idea. However, we went ahead with bits and pieces.

I spoke about the analogy of the Russian dolls and a temporary accident and emergency department within a temporary building, with a view to having an accident and emergency department in 2026. If my memory serves me correctly, that was almost the same spriocdháta, or time, that we would have built a new hospital in Merlin Park. That is the background and system.

I have a letter here which outlines why hospitals, nurses and staff are under pressure. I have

always been uncomfortable with standing up and clapping, and I regret that. It was something I joined in with. We should have paid tribute to everybody. The cleaners and porters in hospitals should be at the top of the list when we thank anyone, along with the nursing staff and doctors. When we distinguish, we divide. We need to give meaning to the phrase “We are all in this together”. If we are all in this together, let us look at all of the analyses and reports we have received.

The hospital in Galway is under pressure for many reasons. It is too old and congested. On top of that, there are people in hospital who should not be there. I received an answer as Gaeilge. I do not often thank the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, but through his intercession we have received replies. The reply tells me that i lár na Gaeltachta i gConamara, in the middle of the Gaeltacht in Connemara, there are no respite services and day care at the moment, for different reasons. There is no day care because it is in the process of re-registering. We learned there has been no day care in the public facility since March 2019. I had to push and push, and the Minister got the reply for me and so on. That puts extraordinary pressure not just on the families who are caring for their loved ones but also on the hospital system.

The primary care system has caused great problems. It led to the departure of Deputy Shortall from the Labour Party because of the utter failure to roll out primary care in a just and fair manner. We are still in exactly the same, if not worse, spot. We are dealing with Covid. The motion is about nurses, a motion we could not but agree with.

What does the language mean when the Government says it does not disagree with the motion? There are five bullet points in the motion. One refers to the booster programme. I hear clearly that will be made available to staff if they wish to have it. The motion also calls for the Government to publish and act on the McHugh review. Is there a clear answer on that? Will the Government publish the McHugh report? Is that what it means when it says it accepts the motion? Is it waiving the registration and retention fees which are due?

The motion refers to engaging meaningfully and positively. I gather that is what the Government is going to do. I cannot see how the Government will wrap up mental health supports for healthcare workers, although I fully support that, because the state of mental health services inherited by the Minister of State is, as she knows, at an all-time low. We might come back to that on another day.

There have been repeated motions. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues, but these motions become tiresome to those listening to us because they ask us what the Government is doing. It took the Sinn Féin motion, the support of all of the Dáil and a protest outside today to find out that the Government is going to follow some of the recommendations.

I listened carefully when the Minister was speaking. How many recommendations were there? We do not know how many recommendations there are. When he tells us he is going to implement some of them, I would like to judge that. More importantly, the nurses and student nurses would like to judge that so that we can see it in context. What jumps out at me today in the INMO press release is the statement that, “Today’s demonstration is not just about the pay and conditions for student nurses and midwives – it is about the future of our healthcare system.” This is about the future of our healthcare system and not just about pay and conditions, which need to change and be improved.

We can never go back to where we were. Climate catastrophe and Covid are facing us.

We have repeatedly heard wonderful language from the spin doctors. I wish there were more people like the Minister of State who say it as it is. I have seen major changes with one or two Ministers, but the rest are resorting to spin.

We had a discussion last week on reconstructing and reconnecting, when really we should have been talking about human rights in respect of the Covid restrictions and so on. Language means nothing. The most frustrating thing for people and the most dangerous thing for democracy is when language means nothing. We will be on the side of the Minister of State because she is working hard. I might not agree with the ideology or certain things, but it is my job to set that out and say why.

I have listened to the debate and I hope the Minister of State brings some clarity to this. Is the McHugh report going to be published tomorrow? Will the fees be waived? What about the other requests? Is that the result of the motion, so that words and democracy mean something?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I very much welcome the opportunity to address the House on the important motion brought forward by my constituency colleague, Deputy Cullinane, on nurses and midwives. I would like to thank all Deputies who have contributed to this debate.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all nurses and midwives, including students, and all healthcare workers for their unwavering dedication and commitment as we continue to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. There is no doubt healthcare workers have made enormous sacrifices during what has been an extraordinarily challenging and difficult time. In the past couple of months, before there was a spike in Covid cases, I managed to visit quite a few community hospitals in Thurles, Kerry, Galway and Waterford, among other areas, and was able to speak to nurses who have worked extremely hard over the past 18 to 20 months and beyond. I heard from them first hand about how challenging it has been, especially in regard to older people and Covid prevention and control measures. It has been difficult.

I note the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, advised the House that the Government is committed to recognising the great dedication front-line healthcare workers have shown during the pandemic, and work is ongoing to determine how best we can do that. This matter is important but complex because the pandemic is still ongoing, and workers in areas beyond the health service and public service, such as those in private nursing homes, have also made a significant contribution to the national effort to tackle the pandemic.

As Minister of State with responsibility for mental health and older people, I fully recognise the importance of having strong mental health supports for healthcare workers. A range of expertise, advice and other supports are in place for the staff of our health services. They are provided by the HSE's workplace health and well-being unit, a division of HSE national human resources, and through the national health and safety function. The HSE's occupational health service provides specialised medical advice and guidance to employees. It assists managers in the health service in securing supports for their staff where needed and provides information to employees on other supports available to them, such as the HSE employee assistance programme. This is a free confidential support service that provides well-being supports and interventions for staff and service managers when they are needed, including counselling and consultations on staff well-being issues. This programme has been an increased level of support throughout the pandemic. Additional psychosocial supports, including those specifically tailored to healthcare staff, have continued to be delivered in response to Covid-19. These

include free online counselling supports for healthcare workers nationwide. These are not only healthcare workers in the HSE but also healthcare workers who work for private and voluntary bodies. MyMind, for example, is an organisation that provides online counselling free of charge - 4,000 hours a month in 17 different languages - to support nurses who may not originally have come from Ireland. It is important to acknowledge that that support is there.

As part of budget 2022, mental health services will continue to be developed, with funding of €1.149 billion. This funding will provide for 350 new mental health staff across our services. I also welcome the decision of the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, to extend the booster vaccine programme to all healthcare workers, including those in nursing homes. I chaired an inter-agency meeting recently with HIQA, the HSE, public health, the HPSC and the Department to discuss ongoing nursing home preparedness, and this was one of the key issues considered. I also wish to clarify that all mental health service staff and all healthcare workers working in the home will also be offered the booster vaccine. This decision, along with the progress made to date on boosters, will add further to the protections afforded to front-line health staff and the people under their care. Preparations are being made to commence the roll-out as soon as possible, and the Department will continue to engage with the HSE to ensure timely roll-out. I believe everyone will be in agreement that this cannot come soon enough.

Nurses and midwives play a vital role in health promotion and in the prevention and management of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Their contribution is key to enabling the full economic value of healthcare provision across multiple care settings. For the purpose of enhancing the nursing and midwifery workforce, many new initiatives and advance roles are being progressed. Nurse-led community virtual wards are being developed to provide a single point of contact for patients living with chronic diseases such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, COPD, and heart failure. Care is delivered in the community, in the person's home, through enhanced co-ordination and shared pathways of care.

I recognise that this winter will be a difficult one for our healthcare workers. The Government has funded significant initiatives through the 2021 winter plan and budgets 2021 and 2022, across the health service, in the acute, community care and primary care sectors, to reduce demand on emergency care by providing alternative care pathways outside the acute sector in line with Sláintecare. The 2021-22 winter plan will provide for appropriate, safe and timely care for patients by ensuring insofar as possible that effective levels of capacity and resources are in place to meet the expected growth in activity levels. The 2021-22 influenza vaccination programme, which is an important part of winter preparation, was launched on 4 October 2021. Vaccinations have been made available free of charge to adults in specified at-risk groups and children aged from two to 17 years of age, and I encourage all those to avail of this vaccine if they so wish.

It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the past 19 months as a direct result of the pandemic and, more recently, as a result of the ransomware attack. The Department of Health, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are focusing on improving access to elective care in order to reduce waiting times for patients. These plans include increased use of private hospitals; funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals; funding see-and-treat services, whereby minor procedures are provided at the same time as outpatient consultations; providing virtual clinics; and increasing capacity in the public hospital system.

For 2022 an additional allocation of €250 million, comprising €200 million to the HSE and

€50 million to the National Treatment Purchase Fund, has been provided to reduce hospital and community waiting lists. As part of this initiative, I expect there will be an opportunity to consider whether available funding could support the development of a more sustainable primary care psychology service through the recruitment of additional permanent staff. This follows the announcement of €4 million in August to reduce the number of children and young people under 18 waiting more than 12 months to be seen by primary care psychology for the remainder of this year.

Building on the significant growth in the number of healthcare staff, with an additional 4,462 staff this year, initiatives to enhance graduate to specialist and advanced nursing and midwifery practice will maximise nursing responses at senior level. The policy on graduate to specialist and advanced nursing and midwifery practice provides a framework that enables the development of a critical mass of advanced nurse and midwife practitioners. Creating a critical mass of advanced practitioners has demonstrated effective and efficient patient care and can target care across a range of population health needs. The evidence demonstrates high levels of positive patient outcomes, including patient satisfaction, patient education, care continuity, admission avoidance and reduction in the development of condition-related complications. The impacts also include a reduction in waiting lists across a range of specialties and a reduction in the number of hospital admissions. I understand that the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, has asked the Department to work with the HSE on this proposal to increase the numbers of advanced practitioners across the nursing and midwifery workforce by adjusting the target from 2% to 3% over the next three years. This will provide a total of 1,200 advanced practitioners. Currently, there are only 500 in post.

Nurses and midwives, including students, have made an exceptional contribution to the Covid pandemic response. There are about 7,000 student nurses and midwives at present and half of these students are on placement at any given time. The Minister for Health has implemented a number of measures to support student nurses and midwives, including provision of the pandemic unemployment payment in addition to payment of a pandemic placement grant. As the Minister has already stated, he agrees with the recommendation that the pay of interns be increased and will request approval from the Cabinet to make provision for increased financial supports for 2022. He also intends to extend payment of the pandemic placement grant.

I do not underestimate the huge challenges nurses and midwives have experienced throughout the course of the pandemic. Without question, it has been an extraordinarily difficult time. In conjunction with the HSE, the higher education institutes, the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland and clinical partners, the Department will continue to focus on providing the necessary supports to ensure a sustainable nursing and midwifery workforce.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank my colleague, an Teachta Cullinane, for bringing forward this very important motion and join others in thanking not just our nurses and midwives but all the workers in our health service and those who have gone above and beyond during the Covid-19 pandemic to keep us safe. They went voluntarily into dangerous situations and to where we needed them to be to keep us safe. We can never praise them highly enough for what they did but, of course, we could pay them. Nothing says "I value you" like payment.

I take issue with a number of Deputies' use of the term "vocation" in respect of nursing. Nursing is a job. Nurses are not angels; they are workers. They do not have a calling; they are trained. We absolutely need them, but they do not float in on clouds to work. Unfortunately, they must trudge through the traffic like the rest of us. We absolutely need to recognise that.

The Government fails to grasp the importance of the work nurses do because it is sometimes tinged with that vocation talk, which is deeply unhelpful and indeed somewhat disrespectful to the men and women who are, as we all say, on the front line.

I wish to refer specifically to the provision in the motion regarding mental health and to refer to the INMO survey. As I said, nursing is a job. It is a bloody tough job. It will absolutely take it out of you on a normal day. Pre-Covid, I represented nurses and midwives and I was never, ever short of admiration for the work they do. I do not know how they put themselves into those situations. During the Covid pandemic it has been multiple times worse. The INMO survey shows that 22% of our nursing workforce contracted Covid and that 62% cared for people who died with Covid. They will be dealing with that for years. Given what they saw and what they were forced to endure to keep us safe, the least the Government can and should do is pay them when they are working. Pay them; it is not a hobby and it is not a vocation. I understand that a member of the Labour Party was in here to give out to us as the lead party of opposition. That Deputy would do well to reflect on the fact that the very same nurses and midwives we laud in here had their sick pay entitlement cut in half the last time that Deputy's party had the chance. That is how they treat public service workers and we will not take a lecture from that party.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Anyone who has had the unfortunate experience of having to spend time in a hospital or those who have a relative in a hospital will agree the one thing that stands out is the dedication and care that young student nurses give to all of their charges. The burden of work and responsibility that is laid on their shoulders is immense, and it should not be underestimated. They face huge workloads even as they are being exposed to potential Covid infection. The failure to deliver on Sláintecare and to deliver a public healthcare system fit for purpose is a disaster and an indictment of this and previous Governments.

Young student nurses and midwives are the bedrock of our health service now and will be in the future, and we should do everything to ensure they maintain their commitment and dedication to our health service. Unfortunately, the treatment of student nurses and midwives has led to a brain drain. It is shameful that the years of training and experience that the student nurses acquire in Ireland will be of benefit to hospitals abroad. It is understandable that a newly qualified nurse or midwife would want to emigrate and utilise his or her talents in a country where they would receive proper pay and respect. There are approximately 4,500 student nurses in the State. Currently, fourth-year student nurses receive the equivalent of an annual salary of between €21,749 and €22,249 for their 36-week placement in hospitals. The Government has suggested that fourth-year student nurses would now be in line for a 12.5% increase. The student nurses in the years below them are no less dedicated and no less hard-working, and they also have helped the overstretched health services in the fight against Covid 19. They also should be valued for their work, and as employees they should receive proper remuneration for the long hours they have spent, and are spending each day, in hospitals in the State looking after the sick and injured. At the moment most receive nothing or are paid a small and inadequate allowance. Protecting our front-line staff is crucial and the roll-out of a booster vaccination campaign for them is essential and welcome. Student nurses are doing indispensable work, and despite this they are getting no proper financial recognition for this work. There are also substantial costs relating to placements, which results in an additional financial burden on students. Student nurses should not be used as a stopgap measure for the shortfalls in our healthcare system.

Deputy David Cullinane: First, I thank all of the speakers who have made contributions, It is a very important motion. I will respond to some of the contributions, starting with Teachta

Duncan Smith of the Labour Party who spent half of his contribution attacking Sinn Féin on the false assumption that we were against the remaining public health restrictions. In fact, we are against giving emergency powers to a Minister where he makes regulations that have never come back into this Dáil for any proper scrutiny or debate. We are seeking proper accountability and transparency. It strikes me there is a pattern from the Labour Party speakers. They come in and spend most of their time attacking the Opposition, looking for a pat on the head from the Minister, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, or whoever happens to be in the Chamber. All it shows is that they are a weak and ineffective opposition.

I refer back to the motion and some of the points that were made in the Minister for Health's speech. His comments on the McHugh report were disappointing on the issue of student nurses and midwives. As Deputy Catherine Connolly pointed out, what matters now is what the Government is going to do. Again, this is becoming a pattern whereby the Government does not oppose a motion but does not implement it either. This is disingenuous. There is nothing in the Minister's speech about when he will publish the McHugh report. There is nothing in his speech to indicate when he will publish the report, if indeed he will. He said that he would seek Cabinet approval to increase the pay of interns but he did not say when that is going to Cabinet. He also said that he will seek approval to extend payment of the pandemic placement grant and will also support additional recommendations. We have no idea what those additional recommendations are. It is not just us; it is also the student nurses and midwives and the INMO, who were disrespected by not being talked to, and in having negotiations with the Government they are as much in the dark on this as anybody else. This is very disrespectful.

The Minister talked about what is happening in our hospitals at the moment. I had a lengthy exchange with him earlier about the real crisis, with emergency department attendance up, trolley counts up, and huge waiting lists. In his speech the Minister said that the winter plan will provide for the appropriate, safe and timely care for patients but it will not. There is nothing in this winter plan that will deal with crisis in our hospitals. It is a crisis-driven response. Every year we come to the winter, we have a real crisis in our hospitals, the Government comes out with a plan that cannot be implemented because one cannot magic up staff, magic up beds or magic up capacity in the winter when we are in the throes of a crisis. All of this is just window dressing. It is a head-in-the-sand approach. This will not substantially increase capacity and it will not reduce waiting lists.

With the head-in-the-sand approach we are actually seeing the cancellation of procedures right across the board, left right and centre. In every hospital I have visited they are cancelling elective procedures and in some cases cancelling time-sensitive care. This will drive up the waiting lists. There is an ostrich-like head-in-the-sand approach from the Minister for Health. He can come in here and say that his winter plan is going to provide appropriate, safe and timely care, but one only has to talk to anybody who works on the front line in any hospital in the State and they will tell us this is simply not the case.

I will conclude by echoing what Deputy Connolly said in her contribution. It is very important that if the Government does not oppose a motion, they will implement it. I would like the Minister for Health to indicate if and when he will publish the McHugh report. More importantly, I want to see what exactly he is going to do. We have some sense of what he will do for fourth-year student nurse interns. We have some sense of what he will do for the first, second- and third-year students with the €100 payment, which is unsatisfactory. There is no sense, however, that this is going to be permanent or what other measures are going to be put in place. I certainly do not believe that the winter plan for hospitals and the waiting list strategy he has

put in place is going to work. It is more of a glossy brochure approach to Government where we are presented with all of these plans but in reality does not add up to anything of substance. I do not believe it will make the difference that it needs to make.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Workplace Relations Commission

1. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, is not informing the relevant agencies and departments of breaches of the atypical work permit scheme in the fishing sector. [53072/21]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The question is, like all of my questions, very straightforward. I hope that the answer will be forthcoming. It is simply to ask if the Minister of State's attention has been drawn to the fact that the WRC is not informing the relevant agencies and Departments of breaches in the atypical work permit scheme in the fishing sector. I am sure that the importance of this scheme is not lost on the Minister of State, Deputy English. The importance of using every opportunity to ensure that it is applied and applied fairly should also not be lost.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): I thank the Deputy for the question. The WRC is one of a number of agencies that contribute to the enforcement of the atypical workers commission scheme for non-EEA fisheries workers employed in certain Irish-registered fishing vessels. The commission has a particular responsibility for checking compliance insofar as terms of employment, permission to work, payment of wages, annual leave, public holidays, and the national minimum wage entitlements are concerned. Where contraventions are detected, WRC inspectors will engage with the vessel owner to achieve compliance and, where relevant, secure any associated unpaid wages. Prosecutions are, in general, initiated in all cases where non-EEA fishers are employed without an atypical worker permission or without another valid permission to work and where owners have failed to address contraventions following the issue of a contravention notice.

Some 490 inspections of fishing vessels have been undertaken by WRC inspectors between the launch of the scheme in February 2016 to the end of September this year. The vast majority of fishery inspections are unannounced and are undertaken in port. In addition to ongoing inspection and compliance activities, there have been eight specific target operations to date, the latest of which, Operation Palace, took place in September this year and involved 30 inspections. A total of 20 prosecutions have been brought against fishing vessel owners regard-

ing offences under employment legislation, of which 16 have concluded and four are currently pending and awaiting a final hearing.

The memorandum of understanding on the monitoring and enforcement of the atypical worker permission scheme, which was signed by 11 Departments and agencies in May 2016, provides, among other matters, for the further co-ordination, co-operation and information exchange between the parties. The memorandum does not make specific provision in respect of the WRC notifying other parties of contraventions of employment legislation. However, details of convictions are published in the commission's annual report. In addition, in accordance with an agreement reached with the Department of Transport in April 2019, the WRC informs that Department's marine survey office of any contraventions or potential contraventions of fishery working time legislation. I am aware that this matter was raised on 20 October at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment regarding the capacity and resourcing of the WRC and its work in addressing issues relating to migrant workers. I am also aware that the director general of the commission gave a commitment to the committee to inform the Department of Justice, which administers the scheme, as soon as convictions against fishing vessels' owners are secured. I am advised by the director general that a schedule of such convictions was forwarded to the Department of Justice on 21 October and that arrangements are in place to inform the Department of further convictions as they arise. I would agree with that approach.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Is it suggested that every time notification does not happen, there has to be a meeting of the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment? That is not sustainable or fair, particularly to the workers in the fishing industry who are dependent on these arrangements. We are talking about breaches ranging from a failure to grant annual leave or a public holiday entitlement right up to unauthorised deductions from wages. What really worry me are the contraventions of the working time regulations. We have heard the stories in this regard.

The vast majority of employers in the sector are trying to do the right thing. They are the ones who want to ensure rigorous inspections. They do not fear an inspection; they welcome it, but they want a level playing field.

Is it the intention to include the mechanism I describe in a revised memorandum of understanding or to put it on a more sustainable footing? The Department of Justice was not being informed. We raised this on 20 October and now the WRC is informing the Department, but we cannot keep checking on it. It should be par for the course; it should be part of the memorandum.

Deputy Damien English: We can certainly examine that. The memorandum was signed several years ago by 11 Departments and Government agencies. The working time directive is generally administered by the Department covering the marine, not necessarily my Department. This is the difficulty with the scheme. That responsibility for the scheme extends across Departments and agencies is the difficulty with it. Best practice is what has been done since October. I am glad the decision in this regard has been made. We can certainly carry out a review, including in respect of the memorandum of understanding.

I have had discussions with representatives of various Departments on the view that we should review the scheme overall. It has been in place for more than five year. Having spoken to various stakeholders, I believe it is timely to review it and make a decision on its future. That

process will be led by the Department of Justice or the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in conjunction with my Department because the scheme is administered by a range of Departments. We should take the opportunity now to review it and make some decisions. I am happy to involve all stakeholders in that. I have had discussions with officials and, therefore, it is a matter of putting the review in motion. The Deputy might agree it is timely.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I absolutely agree; it is past time. The Minister of State said an update is something to consider. I agree on that. Perhaps he will, at the next opportunity, create a timeline for the update because these things tend to drift if a robust timeframe is not put in place. I am thinking about the necessary work done by the WRC, but the fact that there is no follow-up regarding prosecutions means the deterrent does not exist. The majority of employers in this area are fine and want to do the right thing but tackling the rogue employers is necessary.

I welcome the fact that there is to be a review. I would like the Minister of State to give a timeframe. I would also like to hear him commit to speaking to representatives of the WRC and ensure the obligations will be met until such time as it is completed. Informing the Department should occur as a matter of course. This is not in the memorandum of understanding, but the opportunity now exists to ensure, between now and the completion of the review, that the Department will be informed in a timely manner.

Deputy Damien English: I agree with the Deputy that the vast majority of employers in this area are good and genuine and treat their workers extremely well. The investigations cover the cases where there might be some rogue employers. They are dealt with and followed up on. The WRC has the inspectors in place and the additional resources following budget 2022 to complement and increase its work in this area.

The scheme covers 170 vessels and approximately 149 owners. We should be very clear on that. Over the period in question, nearly every vessel or owner has been investigated. We track the scheme quite well. It was put in place to try to deal with a difficulty arising in the courts in 2015.

If we are to have a review, it should be done quite quickly. I do not see why these things have to drag on. I looked into this several months ago. I had meetings with officials from one or two relevant Departments to try to make progress, but not all of them yet. I hope to see a review quite soon. When it is done, we can either keep the scheme, make changes to it or replace it with another. To me, that could be done quite quickly.

Corporate Governance

2. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when the corporate enforcement authority will replace the Office of Director of Corporate Enforcement, ODCE; and the exact powers that will be afforded to the authority. [52006/21]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: White-collar crime in this country has an enormous effect on how society functions. The inability to eradicate white-collar crime can skew and distort markets. There are many examples of white-collar crime and fraud being perpetrated in markets and businesses, meaning a significant number of victims who will suffer radically. There has been

none of the necessary enforcement to date. When is the enforcement likely to happen?

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Legislation to establish the new corporate enforcement authority is currently before the Houses. The Companies (Corporate Enforcement Authority) Bill 2021 was published on 3 September. Second and Committee Stages have been completed in the Dáil, and Report Stage is scheduled for 10 November. Operational arrangements for the transition to an agency continue to advance in parallel, with progress being overseen by a steering group of officials from the Department and the ODCE.

The Government's objective, with the support of the Houses, is to enact the legislation as soon as possible with a view to the establishment of the agency in January 2022.

The legislation, when enacted, will be a milestone in the area of corporate enforcement in Ireland. With new technology and more sophisticated economic crime, it is more important than ever to have a well-resourced, stand-alone agency to identify those not complying with company law. The Bill provides the corporate enforcement authority with more autonomy, particularly the ability to recruit those with the required skills and expertise. Having the autonomy to recruit those with specialist skills and expertise will be essential to ensuring the continued capacity of the authority to fulfil its mandate. The authority will have a structure similar to that of a commission, with a chairperson assisted by other members, who may have delegated responsibilities for other specific functions. The Bill provides for flexibility of up to three full-time members, including the chairperson. This is designed to enable the new authority to bring in expertise to meet the differing demands pertaining to its remit, and it will enhance the capacity of the authority to investigate multiple and more complex investigations in parallel.

The Bill invests the new authority with all the same functions and powers that the ODCE currently has, with some modifications to meet the differing demands of its remit, which includes investigation, prosecution, supervision and advocacy roles. These functions include encouraging compliance with the Companies Act 2014; investigation of suspected offences, including through the appointment of inspectors; criminal investigation and prosecution; and civil enforcement of the obligations, standards and procedures to which companies and their officers are subject under the 2014 Act. Furthermore, the Garda members of the new authority have, and will continue to have, all the powers of An Garda Síochána.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The ODCE has had a troubled existence, mostly because of the lack of resources it has received. We spend so much time in this Chamber discussing legislation and fretting over wording or phrasing but it is usually the case that unless there is proper enforcement, the legislation is not worth the paper it is written on. There are many examples of businesses, and staff and employees especially, around the country that have suffered as a result of this issue.

The ODCE probably hit rock bottom when the trial of Seán FitzPatrick, the former chairman of Anglo Irish Bank, for allegedly misleading the bank's auditors fell apart. That was another example of an organisation that did not have the necessary resources. The Minister famously stated that this will be an Irish FBI for white-collar crime. When will it happen? When will the corporate enforcement authority be launched? How many staff will it have? What budget will it have? What exact independence will it have from the Department?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: It will no longer be an office of the Department; it will be an

independent agency under the remit of the Department. The new authority will have all the necessary human resources required, both civil servants and members of An Garda Síochána, to fulfil its mandate. The budget for the ODCE has been increased by 20% since 2018 and the Department has sanctioned 14 additional staff to be assigned to the new authority. The permanent complement of members of An Garda Síochána will increase from seven to 16 and the total headcount of the authority will increase by 50%. This is in line with the assessment by the current director of the staffing needs of the authority. I look forward to the enactment of the Bill before the Christmas recess and I would like to be in a position to sign the establishment order so that the body can come into being in January next year.

As regards the Anglo Irish Bank trials, it is important to point out that the investigation of the ODCE into Anglo Irish Bank comprised five separate investigations and resulted in four trials, all of which resulted in persons being convicted on indictment of criminal offences. It is accepted that there were investigative failures relating to DPP v. FitzPatrick, but I do not think they were entirely down to resource issues.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: On a slightly left-field note, this country is also dealing with a big problem relating to commissions of investigation. For example, the NAMA investigation established in June 2017 was meant to be completed in 2018 but now has an extension until December 2021 at least. It has spent approximately €2.5 million but that figure is likely to reach approximately €10 million. There is also the Siteserv commission of investigation established in 2015. I recall the Government of the time was rocked by it in 2015. It had an estimated cost of €4 million but it is still rumbling on. I think it was the Minister himself who estimated it could top out at €30 million, while some analysts have said it could top out at approximately €70 million. It strikes me that there is a need for a permanent office of investigation rather than just creating *ad hoc* commissions for each crisis. Would it not be a reasonable proposition to build a fully resourced office for commissions of investigation into corporate misgovernance, fraud and crime in this area so that we do not have to deal with these never-ending investigations with unlimited budgets?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: It is fair to say that when commissions of investigation were established and that legislation came through the House - I remember it well during my first or second Dáil term - the view at the time was that they would replace tribunals and would be much less costly. They have certainly been less costly but the view was that they would happen more quickly, which has not been the case. Frankly, there is a real difficulty in inquiring into any kind of commercial transaction because there will always be people who will argue that a better result or price might have been secured for something had it been sold to someone else or done sooner or later and that is very difficult to prove. I hope this new stand-alone agency will reduce the need for commissions of investigation, at least in the context of issues of company law. It does beg the question of why, if there was evidence of criminal activity in connection with those matters that are now being considered by the commission of investigation, they were not investigated by the ODCE or the Garda rather than a commission of investigation.

Company Registration

3. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to strengthen the role of the Companies Registration Office, CRO, to deal with the increase in fake or bogus companies; and if he will make a statement on the mat-

ter. [53078/21]

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I ask this question on the back of an article written by John Mulligan, a journalist with the *Irish Independent*, in July. The article suggested that several bogus companies have been created across the State. The CRO advised that it had no role to play in verifying the details of these new companies. In my capacity as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment, I wrote to the Minister's Department regarding the CRO and seeking clarification on this issue. I was not happy with the response I received and, therefore, I ask the Minister to address the issue now.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Ireland has a reputation for being a well regulated and business-friendly country in which to establish and operate a business. Company law has an important role to play in that regard. At the end of 2020, there were more than 500,000 companies on the register of companies in Ireland and more than 600,000 business names on the register of business names. This resulted in more than 131,000 filings made with the CRO last year.

The office also maintains several other registers. These registers exist to provide transparency about corporate entities through their life cycle. They are examined by a wide range of stakeholders, including those who have a commercial interest, such as potential investors, professional advisers, financial institutions and suppliers. Other interested stakeholders include civil litigants and regulatory and enforcement authorities.

Company law is primarily concerned with providing the legislative framework for the structure and operation of companies incorporated in Ireland, whether domestic or foreign, and does not regulate or supervise the activities of the companies. Such activities are governed by other legislation including, for example, in the areas of consumer protection, competition, taxation, anti-money-laundering and fraud. Compliance matters in these areas come under the remit of other relevant statutory bodies.

The long-standing policy in respect of company incorporation has been to accept the bona fides of those filing documentation, subject to a completeness check, and to ensure that all the necessary documents have been provided and appropriately completed and signed. While it is not the role of the CRO to question the motivation for incorporating a company, the office is developing a risk-based approach to integrity checking of applications and it is following up on some issues that are arising. The provision of false information is a criminal offence under section 876 of the Companies Acts and when the CRO has concerns in this regard, such matters are referred to the Director of Corporate Enforcement.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank the Minister for his response but I am unclear as to the precise action he will take on the issue. I am sure he will agree that the establishment of fake firms in the State is not only a risk to consumers who could be defrauded by these companies, but is also a stain on our reputation internationally. Furthermore, I am sure he will agree that the maintenance of a good faith register of companies without due diligence in respect of important details such as who the directors are and whether the registered address is an actual existing premises is not the best way for the CRO to operate. I hope the Minister can outline the steps he can take to address the problems and the timeframe in which he expects the necessary changes to be made.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: As regards fake or bogus companies, the position is that once a company has been incorporated, it is subject to the provisions of company law and other legis-

lation. This includes filing obligations with the CRO when company circumstances change and the filing of annual returns. In addition, newly incorporated companies have reporting obligations to the Revenue Commissioners and under anti-money-laundering legislation are required to register certain information in respect of their beneficial owners with the central register of beneficial ownership of companies and industrial and provident societies, that is, the RBO. My officials closely monitor existing company law frameworks to ensure they remain fit for purpose and are responsive to emerging challenges. For example, the Companies (Corporate Enforcement Authority) Bill, which is currently before the Oireachtas, contains new provisions requiring directors to provide personal public service numbers to the CRO. We believe this is a significant enhancement of the current regime and will assist the office in verifying the authenticity of directors and companies.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: As we become increasingly dependent on technology, the way consumers interact with businesses is changing rapidly. Although there are significant benefits to that, it does come with greater risk of fraud and, unfortunately, it seems that is what we are seeing at the moment. The fact that there is possibly a large number of bogus and fake companies must be addressed as a matter of urgency. I wrote to the Minister's Department in July regarding the issue but the response from the Department was pretty woeful. It previously insisted that the CRO relies on a good faith approach. It is clear that is easier for business and it is effective but it is also clear that it leaves the register open to serious abuse, which we are now seeing. We can clearly see what is happening in the context of a significant number of companies being registered. I refer to 100 companies that were registered to one address. One fake company registered using the address of the CRO itself. We need action on this issue. I appreciate that time is limited.

8 o'clock

I am happy to follow up with the Minister later regarding how we can work together to end what seems to be a fairly widespread practice. We need to stamp it out.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I am aware that the Deputy wrote to the Secretary General of my Department about this issue. I believe she replied on 30 July, setting out a detailed response to some of the matters raised, particularly regarding 100 companies being registered at one address, and companies even being registered at the same building that the CRO is based in. I think the reply is robust, but that is not to say that we cannot improve things further.

I would like to restate that providing false information to the CRO is a criminal offence and can result in prosecution by the Director of Corporate Enforcement or the Director of Public Prosecutions. Arising from integrity checking undertaken by the CRO, concerns remain about 34 companies currently on the register. In addition, the CRO has not progressed the incorporation of a further 22 applications. In recent months the CRO has made six referrals to the Director of Corporate Enforcement arising from information provided in these cases.

Job Creation

4. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the jobs that have been created in the past 12 months in south western areas of Cork. [53403/21]

Deputy Michael Collins: I ask the Minister of State to outline the number of jobs that have been created in the last 12 months in the constituency of Cork South-West. I would appreciate it if he could provide me with a breakdown of the figures and the geographical spread of those jobs. It is a huge constituency that spans all the way from Inishannon and Kinsale to Dursey Island, Mizen Head and Sheep's Head. Employment and the provision of good, decent jobs is a huge concern in the constituency. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State could outline where the jobs have been created in the past 12 months.

Deputy Damien English: I thank the Deputy for the question. I am sorry that the exact information that the Deputy requested is not readily available just yet, but as soon as we have it, or updated figures for the last number of months, we will bring it to the Deputy.

I can inform the Deputy about the jobs created within Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland's client base for 2020. The CSO also provides data from the labour force survey, although it does not record whether a job is newly created.

My Department collects data on employment in the client companies of our agencies, namely, Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta, as well as engaging with the local enterprise offices, LEOs, on an annual basis. The data provided through the annual employment survey for 2020 tells us that 2,702 net jobs were created within Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland client companies in the south-west region, including counties Kerry and Cork, which covers the region referenced by the Deputy.

According to the CSO, the most recent employment figures available under the labour force survey are for quarter 2 of 2021. Employment for the south-west region was 309,000 in quarter 2 of 2020 and increased to 332,200 in quarter 2 of this year, an increase of 23,200. Looking at employment in quarter 2 of 2019 to show pre-pandemic times, employment was 319,900. Therefore, the increase from pre-Covid times to quarter 2 of this year is 12,300 for the region.

Employment figures for LEO clients are also available for 2019 and 2020. The net change in jobs for the south Cork LEO, which covers the Deputy's area was 97 jobs created in 2019 and ten in 2020, which reflects the pandemic that we have just come through.

As the Deputy will be aware, the economic recovery plan, which was published in June, sets an ambitious target to exceed pre-crisis employment levels by having 2.5 million people in work by 2024, and in more productive and resilient jobs. The plan sets out the Government's commitment to create the right environment for a jobs-led recovery by helping businesses to become more resilient and agile, and by supporting people to transition to new jobs in growing sectors of the economy. As the Deputy is aware, SMEs account for over two thirds of the total employment and, as such, a strong focus on indigenous SMEs is critical to a jobs-led recovery.

Under the Enterprise Ireland's regional enterprise development fund-----

Deputy Acting Chairman: Thank you, Minister of State. You will have a further opportunity to come back in.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. The Minister of State said that 2,702 jobs were created, but that figure relates to the whole south-west region, including counties Kerry and Cork. I am particularly interested in the west Cork figures, because the specific question I asked relates to that area. Unfortunately, the Minister of State does not have figures for 2021, when we are at the latter stages of the year. He stated that 97 jobs were created

in 2019 and ten jobs were created in 2020.

We are feeling the pinch in west Cork. I would have preferred a breakdown of the figures including information on jobs created in towns such as Bandon, Clonakilty, Kinsale, Skibberdeen, Bantry and Dunmanway. We also must think of the peninsulas. Over the past number of years, these areas have been totally dependent on the farming and fishing industries. Both of those industries are on their knees at this stage. The fishing crisis is unbelievable, but the farming crisis is rumbling on on top of that.

What future has the Government created for people living on peninsulas who are going to suffer quite a lot over the next number of years?

Deputy Damien English: Previously, I was going to reference the Enterprise Ireland fund of €115 million for regional enterprise strategies and plans. It is a good time for the Deputy to raise the issue, because we are about to sign off on the regional enterprise plan for his area. I have no doubt that he made a submission to that with some suggestions as to how we can create jobs and serve the peninsula and the various towns he referenced previously.

I am conscious that in the Deputy's area, the farming and fishing sectors are very strong areas of employment. Farming has had some good years. Yes, there are difficult challenges ahead, but they can also be regarded as opportunities. Both Kerry and Cork LEOs and the enterprise strategies in the area reflect the agrifood opportunities that are there, both in terms of agriculture and fisheries. Naturally, the areas of farming, life sciences, ICT, tourism and hospitality are key areas. We want to work with all interested partners in the region. The best way to implement enterprise supports is through the LEOs in the local areas. However, the regional strategy is key. I chair the strategy for the Deputy's area. We expect to be able to sign off on the plan in the next few weeks, and certainly, before the end of the year. November will be key to doing that. The plan will reflect a number of actions that can be implemented and funded through Enterprise Ireland through our Department in the years ahead to try to protect existing jobs and also increase the opportunities to create new jobs. I am happy to work with all interested partners in the area in doing so.

Deputy Michael Collins: I look forward to working with the Minister of State on that. However, to create jobs in rural Ireland, we must focus on the seriousness of the situation regarding the collapse of the fishing industry and what looks like the future collapse of the farming industry in this country. We need to look at issues like the provision of broadband in rural areas. Broadband has not come to rural areas such as west Cork. It was promised, five years, six years, seven years ahead. I looked at the local newspaper, the *Southern Star*, last week. Johnny Crowley's pub in Inishannon wants to open up a local hub, obviously to keep the pub business going, but also to provide a service to the local community. There is no broadband in Inishannon, which is just down from Cork city. That tells you how many light years we are from reality. I spoke to the Tánaiste this morning about roads in west Cork. There is no vision for the development of roads in west Cork. To create employment in west Cork, there needs to be a proper roads structure. We have a failing roads structure. Neither the southern or northern relief roads or the Inishannon or Bantry bypasses have been included in plans going forward for this year. The provision of public transport is at an all-time low. We need change if we want to create good jobs for west Cork and to put it on the same level playing field as every other constituency in this country.

Deputy Damien English: I can assure the Deputy that all our development agencies have

that regional approach. The proof is in the pudding when one looks at the figures for Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland. Over 65% of jobs created by both agencies are created in the regions. Through the enterprise plan, the LEOs also very much focus on their own areas. The Deputy mentioned two issues in particular, that is, rural areas and rural investment. If the Deputy analyses the budget that was allocated to the Minister of Rural and Community Development and her Department over the next four years, he will see that close to €1 billion will be spent on rural areas. I have no doubt that the Deputy and many others will be involved in a number of projects that will draw down on that funding.

Many parts of rural Ireland have the opportunity to thrive. The remote working strategy that the Tánaiste launched last January will complement that offering and give people the chance to be able to live and work in rural Ireland and many areas that the Deputy represents. I do not share the Deputy's view that agriculture is going to suffer as a result of our future plans. The Deputy will be reluctant to admit that agriculture has thrived in many areas over the last few years. We can build on that with the right approach. I have a more positive approach and outlook than the Deputy. That is his prerogative and choice.

On the issue of rural broadband, what is key is that the contract is signed. There are plans in place to deliver rural broadband into everyone's home and to every business. That is a lot further on than we were a couple of years ago. We all know that for that to happen on the ground will take a number of years. There are negotiations on the way in relation to the remote working strategy launched by the Tánaiste last January to have that contract reviewed. Where we can, we will expedite it. Key for me, and it should be the same for the Deputy, is that the contract is signed, which will result in a spend of over €5 billion in the delivery of broadband in this country. It means that everybody represented by the Deputy will have broadband soon. Yes, we all wish they had it yesterday and will have it tomorrow, but at least they know it is coming. If the Deputy has some great way to expedite it, I would love to hear about it.

Employment Rights

5. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his attention has been drawn to research (details supplied); his views on the findings of the research; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [53079/21]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The question relates to a research paper entitled *Inside Out Hospitality: A Study of Working Conditions in the Hospitality Sector in Ireland*, which was published during the summer by Dr. Deirdre Curran of NUI Galway. The findings it contains are quite stark. They are very troubling. My questions are simple. Has the Tánaiste read the paper? Was he disturbed by what is in it? Does he plan on taking any action directly on the back of it?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of working conditions in the hospitality sector. I have seen a synopsis of the report and the Oireachtas briefing document that Dr. Curran provided to the committee. The research by Dr. Deirdre Curran of NUI Galway, *Inside Out Hospitality: A Study of Working Conditions in the Hospitality Sector in Ireland*, was undertaken during 2019 and published in the summer. I was very concerned to read of the working conditions reported by the 257 hospitality workers surveyed. I have asked departmental officials to consider the report's findings. I know the research may not be representative but it still should not be discounted. Earlier this month, it was discussed at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media.

As the House knows, Ireland has a robust set of employment rights that protects employees. All employers in all sectors carry the same obligations regarding compliance with employment rights. The Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, is the statutory body charged with promoting and enforcing compliance with the relevant employment law statutes in the State, while the Health and Safety Authority, HSA, has specific powers on issues relating to abuse, harassment and bullying. The HSA's workplace contact unit is available to receive reports on such matters by phone or email. In addition, complaints seeking redress may be referenced by an individual employee to the adjudication services of the WRC, which will hear the complaints and issue a direction or recommendation depending on the subject matter of the complaint.

The hospitality sector is subject to announced and unannounced inspections by WRC inspectors, including at night. In 2018, the sector comprised just under 20% of inspections. In 2019, which was the last full year of unrestricted inspection activity prior to the pandemic, the sector comprised almost 40% of all WRC inspections and visits. In this regard, 14,000 employees were directly impacted by the activity and it resulted in more than €640,000 in unpaid wages being identified and paid.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Tánaiste for the response. The findings are very worrying. The Tánaiste outlined what is in place to protect workers, but the findings not just from Dr. Curran's research but also from Unite the Union's research paper, Hidden Truths - The reality of work in Ireland's hospitality and tourism sector, point to an industry where there are significant issues. As I have to say every time, it is not all employers. These findings relate to the current system the Tánaiste outlined. He has outlined what protections there are for workers. I have to put it to him that they are not doing their job if we see findings such as those in Dr. Curran's report. With regard to ill-treatment, 77% reported verbal abuse, 64% reported psychological abuse, 15% reported physical abuse and 55% have either witnessed or experienced harassment. These are very stark figures that highlight what is taking place in the climate outlined by the Tánaiste. What does he propose to do in response to these findings, which have emerged under the regime he has just outlined?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Principally, what we need to do is to encourage people to make complaints to the WRC and the HSA. No matter how many inspectors we have and no matter how robust the regime of inspection we have, it will only ever be possible to inspect a small minority of businesses at a particular level of frequency. As we all know from experience, starting with when the cigire came to school and then inspections in our workplaces, things may look fine when the inspector is there but it may be very different when he or she is not. We need to encourage people to make complaints. This can be done through the free phone line, the WRC website and the HSA. I very much appreciate in saying all of this that many people feel unable to make complaints for fear of intimidation or victimisation. Many of those working in particular sectors often come from migrant backgrounds and may have limited language competencies. This can also make it harder for them. We need to particularly target these sectors for unannounced inspections in particular.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The cigire cannot be there all of the time but, for the avoidance of doubt, the trade union will be there all of the time. This is the best defence a worker has and the best chance of vindicating people's rights at work. The Tánaiste pointed to the issues in the sector. Some of them relate to the fact that there are many migrant workers in the sector. Some of them also relate to the fact that people do not feel supported to make complaints. The solution to this cannot just be more inspections. There was only €1 million in additional funding provided for the WRC in the budget. This should be increased dramatically. If what

the Tánaiste is telling me, and it appears to be, is that he is reliant on the inspection regime and people having the courage to come forward, which I do not think they will have, then we need to see additional inspectors in the WRC and in the HSA and a bit more proactive surveillance taking place. All of the available evidence suggests that where there are inspections, they are delivering for workers - not to the extent a trade union would do but it is happening. We need to do a bit more than simply just talk about more inspections. More needs to be done to speak directly to these workers.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: The budget provides for increases for the HSA and the WRC next year. When it comes to the WRC, the budget provides for the recruitment of an extra ten inspectors in addition to replacing those who retire. We can build on this in the years ahead.

Another matter I am progressing is legislation on tips and gratuities. I hope to get this legislation done in the next couple of months. It will outlaw the practice of using tips or gratuities to top up wages. It is already illegal in respect of the minimum wage but not illegal when it comes to higher rates of pay. It will also ensure that electronic tips and gratuities, which are much more common these days, have to be divided fairly and equitably among the staff. As well as this, it will provide transparency to customers so they will know what the policy is on tips and service charges, how they are managed and to whom they go.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Enterprise Policy

6. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment further to Parliamentary Question No. 80 of 15 September 2021, the status of the new west regional enterprise plan to 2024; if the plan has been completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52891/21]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question is very straightforward. I am asking for the status of the new west regional enterprise plan to 2024.

Deputy Damien English: I thank the Deputy for the question. Regional enterprise development and sustainable local job creation is a key policy priority of the Department and the Government. The Department is overseeing the development of nine new regional enterprise plans to 2024, including for the west region covering the county the Deputy represents. These are bottom-up plans developed by regional stakeholders working together to identify growth opportunities, recognise vulnerabilities and address ecosystem gaps to enable sustainable job creation in businesses throughout the regions through collaborative regional actions. The new west regional enterprise plan to 2024, which covers Galway, Mayo and Roscommon, will complement and build on the core activities of IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and local employment offices. There will also be greater involvement of local authorities as well as educational stakeholders and institutions. It will involve the wider range of State bodies involved in enterprise development in the region, with a focus on creating sustainable employment opportunities.

The Minister of State, Deputy Robert Troy, is driving the delivery of the new plan in the west and he has been engaging directly with the west regional steering committee. This is made up of regional stakeholders, including representatives of IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, local employment offices, local authorities, regional skills fora, the Western Development Commission and others. The group is chaired by Evelyn O'Toole, founder and CEO of Complete Laboratory Solutions.

The regional stakeholders in the west region are finalising their work and expect to sign off the draft plan in early November all going well. Once this is done it is intended to publish and launch the west regional enterprise plan along with all of the other new plans before the end of the year. To assist the regional enterprise plans, the Department, through Enterprise Ireland, has made available to date more than €126 million in regional enterprise funding to aid locally led regional enterprise development projects. Of this, more than €18.8 million has been approved for nine regional enterprise projects for the west under the regional enterprise development fund and, more recently, the regional enterprise transition scheme. We discussed this in a previous parliamentary question submitted by the Deputy. I know she is a believer in the strategies.

I am pleased to see positive news on the jobs front for the west with announcements this year, even though it has been a difficult year, by IDA Ireland of more than 400 jobs in Galway and 30 jobs in Ballina.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister of State and I appreciate his answer. IDA Ireland is very important, as is Enterprise Ireland. The Minister of State referred to bottom-up plans. These do not seem to be happening. I welcome that the plan will be published very soon and that it will be published before Christmas. I am thinking, for example, of wool. It has taken donkey's years to get a feasibility study for wool, which has huge possibilities. I am looking at seaweed, on which we still do not have a national policy. It is one of the fantastic possibility areas for the west of Ireland. I am also looking at the islands, on which we have no policy. How does this fit in? This is the first plan since a pandemic was declared and it is certainly the first plan and opportunity since both a climate and a biodiversity emergency were declared. The only thing I see when I look through the various pieces of literature is that it talks about eco-gaps, which I would welcome if it was talking about the gaps in the ecosystem, but it is actually talking about business in a strange way because we have to do things differently. Is that not the case? We have all agreed on this. Will this plan be different and has it taken cognisance of the two emergencies I have mentioned, plus the pandemic?

Deputy Damien English: I presume and hope the Deputy has made a submission to the plan because she has expressed some very good ideas there. The regional plan is meant to reflect all of the local ideas and it is genuinely a bottom-up process. I do not chair this plan but I chair four other ones and the Tánaiste chairs the Dublin one. The Minister of State, Deputy Troy, also chairs four. In all cases - in the plans I, the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and the Tánaiste chair - we have taken the same approach. We have reached out for public consultation with all the stakeholders, namely, local authorities, chambers of commerce, anybody involved in business, the education system and existing companies which have ideas. This is very much meant to fund local ideas and initiatives.

I completely agree with the Deputy on the opportunity presented by seaweed. To make that happen, there has to be a very straightforward conversation involving the stakeholders who have a long tradition of harvesting the seaweed in a very sustainable way. It is about finding the right home for a seaweed strategy. Much research work has been carried out for the Project

Ireland 2040 plan in regard to the marine, which I know the Deputy was involved in. I also attend the meetings on that. That strategy is in place and can lead to an opportunity for seaweed.

On the committee on wool, which is now up and running, it took a little bit of work to get that agreed with the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, who brought it together. Again, it is trying to find a source, a market and a use for the wool. I am from that background and I know that years ago wool had a great value but now it does not. It is up to us, working regionally and locally, to find initiatives to make that happen. I have no doubt the Deputy made a submission and we can look at all the suggestions made by her.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have a concern still on top-down rather than bottom-up if it has taken this long for a Government to commission feasibility studies on wool. There has, therefore, been too much consensus on the way forward as opposed to looking at our assets and how we use them. Anyone with a bit of sense would realise that wool has great value, from insulation to remediation for bogs, just to mention two of its uses. We had public meetings on seaweed but we still do not have a policy on it.

These are two indigenous industries but there are many more. I do not see an emphasis on sustainable, indigenous industries in the west of Ireland, bearing in mind that the last regional assembly report said the north and the west suffered disproportionately from Covid-19 as opposed to anywhere else. I am concerned. It is difficult to put in submissions, to keep an eye on county and city development plans and to speak in the Dáil. Surely there must be enough people within Government to say that seaweed is the growth area with the maximum potential for lives in the west of Ireland.

Deputy Damien English: I want to be completely clear with the Deputy that these plans are meant to be bottom-up. I have sat around the table when the very first versions of these plans were put in place and I can assure the Deputy that it was all local people who were around the table with me when we went through each and every idea. The Deputy and I discussed these during one of my first set of parliamentary questions in this Department. This is the first time the Deputy has suggested wool to me, even though I am familiar with it. I am just mentioning our conversation but I will pass this information on to the Minister of State, Deputy Troy.

This is what these plans are about. Even when the regional plans are published in a couple of weeks' time, there is enough scope there to add in some more changes because a fund has been put in place. It was confirmed in the national development plan and again in the budget we had a couple of weeks ago. That is additional money to fund regional ideas and projects.

I refer again to the Department of Rural and Community Development which will have close to €1 billion over the next four years. There are certainly enough resources out there to fund initiatives and ideas. It involves the bringing forward of ideas by both the locals as well as the State agencies. It is very much not the case that this is a regional plan led by the IDA, Enterprise Ireland, Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, or any of our national agencies. These are meant to be local plans.

The Deputy's county has been quite successful over the last two rounds in drawing down a good deal of money to fund projects and I wish to see these projects implemented at a faster pace. That is something that we are going to do. The wool committee is finally up and running but it is not up to the Government to find a market for every product out there. It is up to us to work together through our agencies with all those interested bodies and I am happy to do that,

as is the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, and we will continue to do that. I completely agree with the Deputy on the issue of seaweed. It is something that we can probably work on together in that we also need initiative in this House to bring such issues forward.

Personal Injuries Assessment Board

7. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his assessment of the latest Personal Injuries Assessment Board on personal injury awards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52657/21]

Deputy Jackie Cahill: Can the Tánaiste give me his assessment of the latest personal injuries awards of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB? When can we see that having an impact on the cost of insurance for individuals, businesses and sporting organisations?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I thank the Deputy for his question. Insurance reform is a priority for the Government and for me, as Tánaiste. Premiums have been too high for too long and I know some businesses and volunteer groups continue to struggle to find insurance at any price. The Personal Injury Guidelines were commenced on 24 April 2021. This met the programme for Government commitment to recognise the work of the Judicial Council in providing guidance on personal injury claims.

The report published by the PIAB on 15 October 2021 provides an insight into the impact of the guidelines on average award levels, as assessed by the board. The report is also based on a much larger sample than our previous figures. It shows that the average general damages awarded under the guidelines is €11,808, a 46% decrease on 2020. The average total award under the guidelines is €14,223, a 40% decrease on 2020. Some 71% of awards are now €15,000 or less, compared to 30% of awards in 2020.

These figures are welcome and show that the Personal Injuries Guidelines brought into effect by the Government are having an impact. I expect this dramatic drop in award levels to be reflected in reduced premiums and the Government will continue to work and to press the insurance sector to make sure this is the case.

The Personal Injury Guidelines are just one measure brought forward under the Government's action plan for insurance reform. Further actions due this year include reform of the law on occupier's liability, enhancement of the role of PIAB, and the strengthening of competition law in Ireland more generally.

Implementation of these legislative reforms alongside other actions set out in the action plan should bring about meaningful reform of the insurance market and create the conditions for the provision of affordable insurance for consumers, community and voluntary groups, and business.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. We all welcome the fall in the level of awards made. When are we going to see this reflected in the price of insurance? When does the Tánaiste expect this to happen? Has he had any engagement with insurance companies on this? According to the Alliance for Insurance Reform, public liability insurance premiums continue to rise the despite a significant fall in the size of injury awards. It states that motor in-

insurance premiums are coming down but that is not the case with public liability insurance. This is having a significant impact on businesses and the sporting organisations. The experience of SMEs, voluntary and community groups, sport and cultural organisations and charities is that renewals are actually increasing right now. The alliance states that the insurance companies cannot have their cake and eat it. It has identified the cost of claims as the key driver of insurance costs and this has been addressed by the Government and the Judiciary. As an elected representative, I am asking the Tánaiste to ensure that the drop in the level of awards is reflected in the cost of insurance to both the general public, businesses and sporting organisations.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I thank the Deputy. It is clear that a fall in the awards that are given to people who have been injured should result in a fall in insurance premiums but it is not the case that a 40% or 50% fall in awards through the PIAB will not result in a 40% or 50% fall in premiums. That is because many or, indeed, most cases do not go through the PIAB. Many are settled before that and that is why insurance companies need to change their settlement strategy. A small proportion, of course, end up in court. Many factors go into the cost of insurance claims and general damages is one part of that.

Central Statistics Office, CSO, data indicate a fall in motor insurance costs. The research from the Alliance for Insurance Reform does not show a decrease yet for public liability. Chambers Ireland would give us some sense that there has been a bit of a fall but we are going to have to watch this over the next couple of months. There is an engagement directly with the industry where the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, meets individually with the CEOs of all of the major companies and is doing a second round of these meetings at the moment to impress upon them our expectation that there should be a euro-for-euro passing on of these reductions in terms of lower premiums.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: Neil McDonnell, the chief executive of ISME, said he would like to see the Government implement the provision of the Civil Liability and Courts Act 2004 providing for the creation of a register of the parties taking personal injury actions, in order to identify potential abuses of the system by persons who make multiple claims. That would be a welcome development in helping to expose anybody who is making fraudulent claims.

The Tánaiste stated that some sectors are finding it very hard to get insurance. Does the Government have any plans to ensure that insurance companies are obliged to give a quote for companies in certain sectors, especially those providing recreational activity and sports services, including water parks, hunting and point-to-point racing? There is an issue arising now whereby no insurance company is giving quotes for those companies and it is a huge problem for the recreational activity and sports sector. Has the Government any plans to address that part of competition law to ensure organisations at least have the ability to get a quote in respect of the activities they provide?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: At the most recent Cabinet committee meeting on insurance, we did an assessment of sectors where it is not possible to get insurance. That involved speaking to insurance companies and brokers. There is a small number of sectors where it is not possible to get insurance at the moment. We are following up on that and trying to understand it better to see what we can do to help the situation. I understand it would be possible legally to require insurers to give a quote, but that might not be the solution because the quote given could be cost-prohibitive. That would not provide the solution we need. One thing that can work is an engagement between the industry affected and the insurers. We nearly got into a situation a year or two ago where there was no one willing to quote for childcare providers. The sec-

tor got together and, by making some changes, it was possible to get an insurer to cover them. That might be what is required in some of the high-risk sectors to which the Deputy referred. Changes they make can make a difference and make them more insurable.

Questions Nos. 8 to 10, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

Industrial Development

11. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of the IDA Ireland commitment to deliver an advanced building solution in Longford town before the end of 2024; if a site has been identified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52766/21]

Deputy Joe Flaherty: Will the Minister comment on IDA Ireland's commitment to deliver an advanced building solution for Longford town before the end of 2024? Will he also indicate whether a site for the venture has been identified?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I was very pleased to visit Longford last week, where I was met by Deputy Flaherty, Senator Carrigy and the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke. The timely provision of appropriate and cost-effective property and infrastructure solutions to meet the needs of multinational companies thinking of investing in Ireland remains essential to winning foreign direct investment, FDI. Over the past five years, IDA Ireland's regional property programme has enabled the winning of capital-intensive projects of significant scale to regional locations, county towns and other large towns that would not otherwise have received an investment.

The agency plans to provide 19 advanced building solutions, ABSs, in 15 locations throughout Ireland over the lifetime of its new strategy, which runs between now and 2024. "Advanced building solution" is a generic term used to describe the range of office, industrial and flexible building solutions being built under the IDA Ireland programme. These buildings offer high-quality production space and office accommodation within a landscaped business park and are designed to meet the requirements of the manufacturing, technology, life sciences and other prospective industries. In respect of the building in Longford, IDA Ireland is continuing to liaise with Longford County Council and wider stakeholders to seek a suitable site for the proposed ABS. The site selection process is ongoing.

IDA Ireland's regional property programme, supported by my Department, will provide property and strategic site solutions to address market failures in regional locations. Under the regional development pillar, the agency aims to win investment to propel recovery and support development in each region, targeting 400 investments for locations outside Dublin by the end of 2024. It is actively encouraging investors to locate in all parts of the country, whether through marketing potential investment sites outside the main cities or working to develop recognised industry clusters.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. I am very pleased that an advanced building solution is now a Government priority for inward investment in County Longford, in line with similar comments from IDA Ireland. Ann-Marie Tierney-Le Roux, head of regional business development, told a recent meeting of Longford County Council that the agency is committed to developing a committed facility in Longford town. It is very much a case of build

it and they will come.

The Tánaiste will agree that the challenge at the moment is to identify a site. Currently, we have in excess of 1,700 IDA Ireland-supported jobs in Longford town, thanks to Technimark, Avery Dennison and Abbott Diagnostics. The Abbott plant is a real success story, having just breached the 1,000 employees mark. The local authority owns lands in the vicinity of the Abbott site but the preference is that IDA Ireland would spread its net further and separately facilitate a possible future expansion for Abbott. I ask the Tánaiste to encourage IDA Ireland to be ambitious and cast its net wide in search of a site in Longford town.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Generally speaking, the regional property programme has been really successful where IDA Ireland identifies a site and is able to provide what it calls an advanced building solution, which I think is a terrible term. It is basically a building that can be used for many different purposes. We then find it is possible to get investment because there is a big difference between taking a potential investor or group of executives to see an empty park as opposed to one where there is a ready-made premises that can be occupied and adapted within a year or two. We have had really good success in this regard in Castlebar, Sligo and many different parts of the country, where we have got hundreds of jobs into towns. That is exactly what we want to do with Longford. We want to acquire a site, develop it and secure investment, thereby bringing jobs into the town and the increased spend that comes with that. Longford is very much on the priority list. I know the Deputy and Senator Carrigy will make sure we are held to delivery on that.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I agree that “advanced building solution” is not the best term. I am old enough to remember when we referred to such premises as advanced factories, which probably made more sense. It is very good that IDA Ireland is committed to such a facility for Longford but it would be a missed opportunity if we allowed it to take the easiest solution by simply acquiring the lands owned by the county council in the immediate vicinity of the Abbott site. What Longford really needs is to get the advanced building solution up and running before 2024 in order that we can actively market it. We hope that, in tandem, Abbott will expand its own operation on the lands that adjoin its property.

I know the Tánaiste had extensive discussions on this matter with local council officials last week and has undertaken to follow up with similar discussions with the CEO of IDA Ireland, Martin Shanahan, with a view to prioritising the securing of a site in Longford town. The message for IDA Ireland from Longford, which I am sure the Tánaiste will pass on for us, is that it needs to be ambitious for the town. There is a great opportunity for us to get an additional FDI facility. As I said, we have 1,700-plus FDI jobs at the moment. There is a real opportunity to attract more and I urge the Tánaiste to pursue that objective aggressively with IDA Ireland.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: The acquisition of property by a State agency is not something that I, as Minister, can get too involved in as it would not be appropriate to do so. However, I certainly hear the case the Deputy is making for facilitating both the potential future expansion of the Abbott site and having an advanced business solution at another location. I know IDA Ireland is aware of the case for such an approach, but I will emphasise it to the agency.

In total, there are six IDA Ireland-supported companies in County Longford employing more than 1,000 people. That is a strong performance by the county in recent years. In addition, the State has been involved in Centre Parcs, which recently announced an €85 million expansion of its Longford forest facility. If we can add another substantial investment to that,

we would be making good progress in the county.

Small and Medium Enterprises

12. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the supports provided for the small business sector under budget 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52578/21]

Deputy Jackie Cahill: Will the Tánaiste outline the supports provided for small businesses under budget 2022?

Deputy Damien English: A strong and resilient SME sector is key to rebuilding the economy after the Covid crisis. Provision made by the Government in budget 2022 aims to ensure small and medium-sized businesses are sustainable and competitive in the long term. Specifically, we want to equip enterprises for the transition to the green and digital economy. We also recognise that some businesses are in need of assistance as we continue to reopen the economy and society in general. My Department, together with IDA Ireland and the local enterprise offices, is working with enterprises to help them to stabilise, reset and recover. To date, €238 million has been approved under IDA Ireland's Covid-19 supports. The Covid-19 pandemic has also seen the agency work beyond its client base. In 2020, Enterprise Ireland took more than 1,200 new companies onto its client management system, a near 70% increase compared to 2019. Overall, the Department's core budget has increased by €103 million or 13.2% on budget 2021. This is a record core allocation for the Department and will significantly bolster the ability of the Department to help businesses to rebuild and grow after the pandemic and the impacts of Brexit, in conjunction with our development agencies.

Other measures include the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, which is extended to April 2022 at a cost of up to €1.4 billion, and a targeted rates waiver to help businesses to get back on their feet. We have also ensured that low-cost, Government-backed loans will remain available. I stress to the Deputy and his colleagues that they should remind businesses that now is a good time to look at their financial needs for the remainder of this year and in the years ahead and to avail of the supports and credit guarantee schemes that are available - the most recent Brexit impact one was launched a few weeks ago - to put financial plans in place for low-cost and long-term funding.

A number of other significant initiatives to future-proof our SMEs on their growth journey include an expansion of the employment and investment incentive scheme, the extension of the small start-up companies relief and the new digital games tax relief, as well as a confirmation of a new €90 million innovation equity fund. That will be a very beneficial fund to invest in companies throughout the country as they seek to bring their products to the market and to scale up as well.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: The years 2020 and 2021 have been extremely difficult for businesses, particularly the businesses that have been adversely affected by Covid-19. I have spoken in the House on a number of occasions about the tourism bus sector and the huge pressure on it. There are a number of companies in my constituency that run very efficient bus operations for tourism. They had no business in 2021 but they have bookings for 2022. There was an allocation in the budget for tourism. It is absolutely imperative that this money is distributed as quickly as possible and that there is an accurate assessment of the businesses that need the

funding to keep their heads above water. Even though the businesses are closed, they still have a serious amount of overhead costs, such as insurance, repayments on their fleets and so forth. Even though buses were standing idle, they were depreciating in value. This sector is under massive pressure and it is a vital cog in the re-establishment of the tourism sector in 2022. Without buses to take tourists to various locations around the country, the tourism industry will not regain its former stature. I ask the Minister of State to ensure that the allocation in the budget is distributed as quickly as possible and that the businesses that need it most receive it.

Deputy Damien English: The Deputy will appreciate that I do not have the details of every scheme across the different Departments with me, especially as I thought the question was coming from a Kilkenny Deputy. However, I have discussed the situation in Tipperary with the Deputy and I have been there as well to engage with all the stakeholders. I am aware of the opportunities as well as the difficulties for some of the businesses in Tipperary. I can assure the Deputy that, from our point of view, when we announce budget supports, both in the recent budget as well as the supports that were put in place throughout the epidemic, we expect them to be implemented, assessed and distributed as quickly as possible. The Deputy is correct that a number of sectors are still under immense pressure. We recognise that. In my view, the supports are available and it is important that they are administered as quickly as possible to give those businesses a chance to survive and avail of the opportunities in the sector in 2022. On top of the supports that I set out, which is a combination of grants, supports, wage subsidies and the opportunity to draw down financial products at the right price, there are other contingency funds set aside so that if we need to draw on them during 2022 we can do so. We are very much on the side of business. We want a jobs-led recovery and for that to happen we must support businesses, and that is what we intend to do.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: The Government has put a massive amount of investment into supporting business through an unprecedented and difficult time. As we head into the spring of 2022, it is essential to continue that support. There are businesses that are still seriously affected and their costs of doing business have increased substantially. In the hospitality sector the way the Covid restrictions are still operating, and necessarily so as we see the level of Covid in the country, is increasing labour costs for those businesses. It is essential that this is kept in mind in the last quarter of 2021 and as we head into 2022. We have done a massive amount to keep businesses afloat and we must go the final leg of the journey to ensure that the financial support that is necessary for the hospitality sector and other sectors that are still affected by Covid restrictions remains in place. It would be a shame, after the huge amount of money we have put into the economy, if we failed to finish the last piece of the jigsaw as we hopefully overcome Covid once and for all. Those businesses just have to be kept afloat until we get back to normality.

Deputy Damien English: I assure the Deputy that we fully intend to see this out. As I said, a jobs-led recovery means supporting business all the way. The Deputy referred to the hospitality sector. It is a sector that valued the wage subsidy more than most. That remains in place until next April. On top of that, I ask the sector to look at and engage with Pathways to Work. There are additional supports in that to encourage the sector to take on new staff and to take staff off the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, or off social welfare. There is a range of supports that are very beneficial. There is a work placement scheme that is open to any business and I am surprised that it has been underutilised since it was announced in July. Again, that is to assist people back into work, but by doing that it is also assisting the employer. Yes, there is a difficult time ahead for the sector the Deputy mentioned. The spring will tell the tale of what

businesses can survive and come through this time.

However, there are over 10,000 vacancies in this sector at present. The best way to assist those companies is to assist with the employment and training. A number of initiatives have been put in place throughout the education system in conjunction with our Department through Skillnet Ireland, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, under the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, and the Department of Social Protection under the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. We want to work with the businesses in this sector to fill those vacancies and to make it a viable sector again. I am full of confidence that we can make it a viable sector, but there are a few difficult months ahead, as the Deputy said as well.

Low Pay Commission

13. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment further to Parliamentary Question No. 51 of 15 September 2021, the status of the examination by the Low Pay Commission and the ESRI of a universal basic income; the international universal basic income pilots studied as part of this examination; if he has received any interim reports to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52894/21]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am following up on the universal basic income and the status of the report from the Low Pay Commission and the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI. Also, has the Minister received any interim reports or is he aware of what international universal basic income pilots have been studied by the Low Pay Commission?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: As I said in September, the programme for Government includes a commitment to “request the Low Pay Commission to examine universal basic income, informed by a review of previous international pilots, and resulting in a universal basic income pilot in the lifetime of the Government”. Earlier this year, I formally requested that the Low Pay Commission examine this issue.

To inform its considerations, the Low Pay Commission asked the ESRI to conduct background technical research on a universal basic income under the terms of the Low Pay Commission-ESRI research partnership agreement. The study will examine the universal basic income pilots that have taken place in other jurisdictions to identify what was learned and what might be relevant to a pilot in Ireland. It will also seek to identify which policy objectives a universal basic income pilot could address and its associated risks and financial implications. It will conclude with recommendations on how a pilot in Ireland might be designed and run.

The Low Pay Commission intends to provide a report to me on this research and its recommendations later this year or early next year. It has not provided me with an interim report to date.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: There is no interim report to date. The Minister might ask why I am tabling this question again so soon after September, but I am a little concerned. It is a revolutionary idea. The Government is to be praised for proposing in the programme for Government to have a universal basic income. I am a little worried about the language creep. For example, different words are used. The question the Minister answered for me is on a universal basic income, and rightly so. Then we look at what is planned for the artists. What the

task force asked for is a universal basic income, but that has become a working age payment or a different type of language. I am a little worried about that. I am also worried that in a previous response the Minister said he would be informed by that. Of course, we must learn from the project for the artists, but it is not a universal basic income. That is what they requested, but that is not what appears to be rolled out. Again, it seems to be limited to a small number of artists and it would be done through a lottery. I know it is not the Minister's area, but there is an overlap and the Minister said he would learn from that. However, they are two distinct things.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: It is entirely reasonable for the Deputy to table a question in November about something she asked about in September. Two months is a long time and it is important that we are held to account in that regard and that progress is made. I have always been clear that the proposal for a basic income for artists and the universal basic income were not the same thing. I did not like the fact that they got confused from time to time. Universal basic income is universal, meaning for everyone. Any basic income pilot that was just for any one group in society or any one profession by definition would not be universal; it would be a selective basic income. That is why these projects are being dealt with totally separately.

The basic income for artists project is being led by the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, and her Department. That is not a universal basic income; it is a particular basic income system for artists. The research being carried out by the Low Pay Commission under my remit is on universal basic income. Generally, when doing a pilot like that - pilots have been done in other countries - people would be randomly selected to participate in the pilot. To be universal it would need to include a mix of people ranging from the very wealthy to the unemployed, and ranging from people who are self-employed to totally different professions because that is the nature of it. If and when we do the pilot, that will be the approach taken.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: It is important to tease this out. From the beginning, the Tánaiste was clear about the distinction but that is what confused me because I understand that the arts and recovery task force asked for a universal basic income. I understood from the Minister that was what was being rolled out, until on the last occasion the Tánaiste distanced himself from that by stressing two separate things. There seems to be confusion on this and I am not sure why they are different. The arts task force asked for a universal basic income. At least what the Tánaiste is saying is clear even if it is not acceptable. When does he expect the report at the end of the year? Will it be published? Is he happy to publish it? What timeframe does he envisage for rolling out the universal basic income pilot scheme? Will it be rolled out next year? Will there be start and completion dates during the course of this Government?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I would hope to have a report by the end of the year and will be happy to publish it once I have seen it. I would certainly like to commission the pilot under the term of this Government. Perhaps this is just semantics and just people using terminology differently, as can happen sometimes. The task force proposes universal basic income for artists, which to me is a contradiction in terms. Universal cannot be for just one particular group. Universal means universal. By definition something that is universal cannot be for any one profession or group and I have always been clear on that.

Enterprise Support Services

14. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will provide a report on Enterprise Ireland supports for jobs and

business in County Carlow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52992/21]

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I ask the Tánaiste to provide a report on Enterprise Ireland supports for jobs and businesses in County Carlow and to make a statement on the matter. Today we heard the great news about the technological university for the south east, which I believe is a game changer. I was involved in the process for the past few years and I really welcome this. I know it will open many doors for employment in Carlow, Kilkenny and the south east. I know this will be a priority for the Tánaiste.

Deputy Damien English: I think we can all agree that the final confirmation about the university is good news and will lead to opportunities for sustainable growth in the area. It will develop enterprise in the local area in combination with our education system.

Delivering balanced regional recovery is identified as a priority within the Government's national economic recovery plan. As part of Enterprise Ireland's regional strategy, Powering the Regions, Enterprise Ireland has committed to building on the south east's regional strengths working with partners such as the local enterprise offices, the south-east business innovation centre, BIC, and the New Frontiers programme in Institute of Technology Carlow, to deliver initiatives that assist entrepreneurship and foster an exciting new generation of innovative and ambitious start-ups in Carlow and the south east.

In addition, my Department and Enterprise Ireland are actively collaborating with local stakeholders to identify gaps in the south east's enterprise ecosystem and to plan and help fund enterprise-enabling infrastructure aligned to regional enterprise plans out to 2024. In 2020, a total of 3,171 people were employed across 89 Enterprise Ireland client companies in County Carlow, which demonstrates the resilience of export-led industry in Carlow in an incredibly challenging year.

Under the regional enterprise development fund to date, over €4 million has been approved for four projects in County Carlow, namely, Insurtech network centre, Crystal Valley Tech, Incupharm and the National Design Innovation Hub. This will assist new collaborative and innovative initiatives that can make a significant impact on enterprise development in the region and nationally.

In September 2021, two pre-accelerator projects were also launched in the south east to assist promoters validate business propositions and which will run until December 2021. A further €377,520 was approved for Institute of Technology Carlow under the regional technology clustering fund to assist the development of an industry-led engineering cluster to expand capability and competitiveness in the south east.

In response to Covid-19, the enterprise centres scheme was launched in August 2020 for both profit and not-for-profit enterprise centres. Two enterprise centres in Carlow were approved to receive €128,478 under this scheme.

I assure the Deputy that as we transition to a sustainable low-carbon economy and accelerate the pace of the digital transformation, this Department, working with our agencies, will continue to assist enterprise development and job growth in all regions, making them more resilient to these challenges.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I welcome the more than €4 million invested in Carlow, which is particularly important with regard to the enterprise centres. I welcome the

supports being extended to businesses in Carlow. I welcome the overall budget for 2022 with up to €90 million to be invested in Irish start-ups through an extension of the innovation fund. Enterprise Ireland funding of €9.3 million has been allocated to 24 regional projects across the country with start-up grants for SMEs and to help them recover from the pandemic. The disruption caused by Brexit was a big factor, as the Minister of State will be aware.

I recently visited the company HaloCare, which empowers older people to live quality, more connected lives in their own homes. It has raised approximately €6.2 million in investment from its founders and other investors, including Enterprise Ireland. I am aware of the excellent work being done by HaloCare. I visited it a few weeks ago and I was blown away by what it has to offer. Companies like this will be vital, particularly for older people. HaloCare concentrates on giving older people the chance to stay in their own home, which is so important for families. It is important to give the funding to these companies.

Deputy Damien English: I am familiar with HaloCare and what it does. It complements what we are trying to do, which is to develop and fund businesses and organisations that can create jobs and, more importantly, can have an impact on society both within the country and beyond.

The Government is committed to keeping people living in their homes for as long as they possibly can. We developed a scheme across a number of Departments to provide supports to enable that and to provide other suitable accommodation when the need arises if they can no longer stay in their own homes. I visited Carlow a few times and I have seen some lovely projects there. I believe the Deputy and other people down there understand that concept quite well.

The €90 million innovation fund the Deputy mentioned is committed to supporting businesses like HaloCare and social enterprise initiatives as well. It is a really exciting project and another tool in our kit to be able to assist companies in bringing their concepts, ideas, initiatives and projects to a new level. We have identified a gap in the market and we think this fund will be able to help these businesses with the investment they need. This €90 million fund will lead onto a much greater investment with matching funding from outside as well.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The Minister of State and the Tánaiste are both welcome to Carlow and to Carlow-Kilkenny at any time. I welcome investment, particularly in small counties like mine. It is vital for Carlow to have this. We now have the game changer with the technological university for the south east. We have much to offer with Carlow well located close to Dublin and all the vital areas that people need to get to.

I welcome that this week, 30 Irish companies are participating in a five-day visit to Toronto, Montreal, Boston and New York. It is really important that such trips happen. It is all about what we can learn and the business we can do overseas as well.

When will the facility IDA Ireland is building in Carlow be operational? That will be very important. We have been waiting for so long for jobs in Carlow and I really welcome this measure.

Deputy Damien English: I do not have a date for when it will be operational but I am glad it is nearly ready. The answer to that would be as soon as possible. As the Deputy knows, considerable work has gone into that over the years. Earlier, I outlined the work of Enterprise Ireland, which complements the work of IDA Ireland, the local enterprise offices, LEOs, the local authorities and other stakeholders in creating jobs in Carlow. Carlow has done well in the

creation of jobs, working with the local business community. That is on the back of a strong education system, which is being enhanced with the technological university and the options that will bring.

9 o'clock

The key for us is that right across Departments, through the regional enterprise plans and working with our local agencies, often driven by local authority involvement, there are various stakeholders. These include education, business, community and business development agencies. They all come together to help fund great projects and ambition.

The Deputy referred to a trade mission that is under way to bring in companies from abroad that want to take on international markets. The small and medium enterprise task force was set up by the Tánaiste this time last year and we want to drive on with companies that want the opportunity to take on international markets. We can support that drive and ambition. The SME task force has set high targets to achieve that. Enterprise Ireland will publish its new strategy in the weeks ahead, again highlighting that ambition to target more companies to take on international markets.

Question No. 15 replied to with Written Answers.

Enterprise Support Services

16. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the supports being provided in 2021 by agencies under the remit of his Department to support businesses and jobs in County Longford; the way in which these will be enhanced by budget 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52767/21]

Deputy Joe Flaherty: Will the Minister outline the supports provided in 2020 by agencies under the remit of his Department to support businesses and jobs in County Longford and the way in which these supports will be enhanced by budget 2022?

Deputy Damien English: I thank Deputy Flaherty for raising this matter. We focused on the IDA Ireland element in an earlier question. The Department and its agencies provide assistance to businesses in all regions of Ireland, including County Longford, to help them prepare for the challenges and opportunities of the future economy. The Department's core budget increased by €103 million, or 13.2%, in budget 2022. This will significantly assist us in helping businesses rebuild and grow after the pandemic and deal with the impact of Brexit and other challenges.

Enterprise Ireland assists companies in every county of Ireland to start and scale, innovate and remain competitive in international markets. There are 45 Enterprise Ireland client companies in Longford, employing 2,959 people in a range of sectors, from consumer foods to digital technologies, and 190 new jobs were created by these companies in 2020. Between 2018 and 2020, Enterprise Ireland provided €8.2 million to companies in Longford, including more than €2 million for two infrastructural projects under the regional enterprise development fund to encourage growth and back ambition.

The local enterprise office in Longford continues to be a "first-stop shop" for providing advice and guidance, financial assistance and other measures for those wishing to start or grow

their own business and acts as a sign-posting service for all Government assistance available to the SME sector. I compliment the work of the local enterprise offices throughout the past 18 months in helping many companies, including companies new to those local enterprise offices, to manage their businesses through Covid-19 and avail of many business schemes, such as the business continuity voucher and online trading voucher. Many other soft supports were put in place through the local enterprise offices. I am trying to visit as many of those offices as I can to see the work they have done but also to compliment them on the different initiatives they have implemented.

The local enterprise network will receive an additional €2 million in budget 2022 to focus on the dual challenges and opportunities of digitalisation and transitioning to a low-carbon sustainable economy for micro and small companies. The Tánaiste referred earlier to the number of IDA Ireland client companies in the region, at 44. They, too, provide great schemes.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank the Minister of State. It is great to see such a strong focus on enterprise and industry in Longford this evening in the replies of both the Minister of State and the Tánaiste. He is correct in emphasising there is a three-pronged approach to job creation and stimulus in the nation, which starts with the local enterprise office. We are extremely lucky to have a very diligent and hard-working local enterprise office in County Longford. Even in recent weeks it has capitalised on the streetscape initiative and I know it secured additional money for that this week.

The message this evening is it is a three-pronged attack and we have a very healthy, strong and vibrant Enterprise Ireland-backed industry in the county. It is also critical we press ahead with plans for an IDA Ireland-backed advanced building solution or advance factory, whatever people call it, which often depends on their age. This is an exciting time for Longford and we have a great opportunity. We are incredibly lucky that my constituency colleague and the colleague of the Minister and Minister of State in the Department, Deputy Robert Troy, is also pushing the Longford agenda hard.

Deputy Damien English: I agree with Deputy Flaherty that Longford has great opportunities open to it and our development agencies are working very hard in the county. The Deputy makes a strong case for Longford, as does the Minister of State in the Department, Deputy Robert Troy, on a daily basis, the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Peter Burke, and Senator Micheál Carrigy. When all of us focus our minds, Longford can do extremely well. It is not just across our Department. We are very much taking a whole-of-government approach to driving regional development and making it a sustainable place in which to invest. Longford town has also been very successful with its urban regeneration project. More than €10 million has been provided to fund initiatives that have been well-planned and put together by the local authority over a long number of years. I was delighted to visit the town a couple of years ago when those plans were put in place. Longford is now securing funding for them.

Our message now to all counties is that if they put in place good strategies and plans, the funds are in place through the national development plan, Project Ireland 2040 and our yearly budgets and are to be won or secured in a competitive way. That will happen as long as the strong plans help us achieve regional development and balance, bringing jobs and other investment.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Greenways Provision

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this matter and the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, for being present again. There is a sense of *déjà vu* because having checked the record, I note that we discussed this matter on 17 November 2020. In the almost 12 months since, much water has passed under the bridge but we have cleared the latest hurdle through the most recent decision of the High Court to rule in favour of the greenway project. I am therefore here again tonight to reiterate the requirement for funding for the south Kerry greenway, which will be an iconic and world-class greenway once it is constructed. I am very hopeful we will have the ultimate green light in the very near future and complete the planning process for the initial and substantive phases of the greenway. As the Minister knows, it will require substantial up-front investment. I estimate in excess of €20 million will be required.

My understanding is the funding would be delivered under the new model through Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII. This will involve the Minister's Department and I hope it will involve a Government decision as the project will be of national importance. It will not just be a local or regional project.

I know the Minister is very passionate about this and he knows the territory well. He is very familiar with it. When we spoke last year, he was very passionate about the project and any time I speak with him in the corridors, I can tell he gets cycling. This project will be transformative for the entire region and marketable internationally as a national project.

We should bear in mind that if the up-front cost is in excess of €20 million, much of that will come back to the Exchequer in the construction phase. I am very confident, as all our research indicates, that within a very short time the revenue generated by this project will far outweigh any State investment required.

I ask the Minister to make provision for the construction funding that will be required for the south Kerry greenway. As I said, I am hopeful we will have the ultimate green light in a matter of days. At that stage, we must be ready to go as soon as possible in order to get this moving. The Minister knows the area of south Kerry I am talking about. It has suffered major decline over decades, particularly in the past 20 years when it suffered economically and socially. It has really struggled. If the arrival of the Farranfore-Valentia railway in 1893 to south Kerry was ultimately a symbol of hope, the subsequent removal of the rail line in 1960 was a symbol of despair. The return of the greenway could be another symbol of hope and real economic prosperity. It is so important to this part of the county, including places like Glenbeigh, Kells, Foilmore, Cahersiveen, Reenard, Valentia Island and the whole of south Kerry. It is something I am deeply passionate about. The Minister will know from the debates we have had in this House how I feel about this project. It was first put in place about 130 years ago and will be here for 130 years or more in the future. It will be our grandchildren and great grandchildren who will benefit from it. It is a very important project.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I thank Deputy Griffin for his contribution and regular discussions on this issue. I am hopeful, once the legal challenges against this

project end and solutions are found for the sections excluded from the planning permission granted by An Bord Pleanála, an updated application for funding will be submitted by Kerry County Council to Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII. A significant portion of the original funding allocated to Kerry County Council for the project remains unclaimed and sufficient funds remain to enable it to submit an excellent request. I know the staff in Kerry County Council have been consulted on many occasions by staff in other local authorities to learn from their experience. I expect any future submission will, again, be of the highest quality. The Deputy will be glad to know that TII has started the process of determining a national cycle network that will be published late next year, which will include a number of other greenways and routes in Kerry, linking it with surrounding counties. We know of the ambition Kerry has in this regard and the progress it is making with the south Kerry greenway and the greenway from Fenit, which travels through Tralee, on to Listowel and continues to Limerick city.

Through the programme for Government and the commitments therein, as well as the national development plan, we now have the money to see these ambitious plans realised over the coming decade. It is important that we continue to press ahead with delivering high quality infrastructure that enables people to choose to cycle and walk to work, school and shops, and that can be used for leisure and tourism. This week in Glasgow, we will hopefully see the nations of the world commit to doing things better and to provide opportunities for our people to act and think differently. I hope and expect that any funding requests submitted by Kerry County Council to deliver this stunning greenway will meet the criteria set out in the public spending code and that the TII will determine it appropriate to fund these. I look forward to cycling on the greenway in the coming years, as I have done in that neck of the woods for many decades.

The point raised about this section of greenway connecting into other sections, including a Killarney to Tralee route that connects into the Listowel link, into Tarbert and on to Limerick, is important. I worked in cycling tourism for many years and brought many people into Kerry on holidays. In Germany or America, when a person is selling the merits of an area, people want to see an integrated network as part of an overall network. I refer to the networks we have in Kerry and west Cork, including the roads in the Iveragh peninsula and Ballaghbeama, in the centre of the peninsula. We do not need a greenway on some of those roads. The volume of traffic is low and local people expect to see cyclists because it is a popular area and they are curious to them. It is not the case that we must always have greenways. Anyone who knows anything about cycling knows that the Ring of Kerry main road - one can hardly call it a "main road" because it is not that wide of a road - particularly the section from Killorglin to Glenbeigh, is not comfortable. I brought thousands of people there who cycled on this route over the years and it is not a comfortable place to be. The speed of the traffic is in the region of 80 km to 100 km per hour. There is no real road margin. There are tight bridges and bends on occasion. We cannot get rid of all those features because part of the charm of the Ring of Kerry is that it is such a scenic area. That is why this route makes so much sense. It provides safe options that mirror the main road and can connect to the other greenways that we will create as part of a network. It can open up beyond Valentia, Portmagee and over the incredible road to Ballinskelligs, on which we do not need a greenway because traffic is relatively slow and the volume is low there. This section will be part of the overall network, some of which will be greenway and some not. We need to design an integrated route network for the sake of Kerry people and tourists.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: The Minister has nailed it in one. This is a key component but we do not have to build greenways all over the country. There are many local tertiary roads that are underutilised at present and often looked upon as liabilities by local authorities. With minor

engineering work they could be massive assets. Perhaps they could have a special designation status as a priority cycle route which would allow for the linking up of dedicated greenways. I wrote about this in 2013. I raised the south Kerry greenway in my first council motion in 2009. We are almost over the line at this stage now.

As the Minister will know, money talks and the key discussion to be had around the south Kerry greenway is to secure the funding. I am confident the remaining issues, in regard to permissions for the small number of sections we spoke about, can be overcome. In the meantime, it would be a shame if there was an unnecessary delay of the overall project, while some of the minor issues are ironed out. This is a project of national importance and it will feed into many of the aims in the programme for Government, in regard to the integrated cycle networks and in making the Wild Atlantic Way more cycling and walking friendly where possible, and all the outdoor initiatives emphasised in the programme.

Old railways, in particular, are brilliant for greenways because their gradients are suitable for cyclists of all abilities. I cycled the Waterford greenway during the summer with my family. My eight-year-old son managed to do 46 km on his bike in a single day because the gradient was amenable to people of all levels of ability. This is no different from the situation in Kerry and it will be an inclusive facility. It will be a massive game changer, but we need the money.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As I said, some of the money is already sitting in accounts waiting for the legal issues to be resolved. Some €3.46 million was allocated in April 2014 and a further €415,000 was issued in the same year for the section in Reenard. Some of that amount is in dormant accounts waiting to be used. Considering how inflation has raised significantly since then in construction, and how some of the work on the viaduct tunnel bridges would probably be more significant than on an ordinary route, one can see how it would be expensive. Transport Infrastructure Ireland has a critical role to play in this. Its designation, working with local authorities, to have the responsibility of rolling out of this national network of greenways was made quite deliberately. Transport Infrastructure Ireland is one of our best delivery agents. It tends to deliver projects on time and on budget. It has real engineering expertise and skills. I will say to TII that a requirement of good engineering is to get good value for money. The importance of that is not to undermine any one project or not to spare money on the likes of this project, which is a spectacular project that takes one's breath away. The route will look out over Kells Bay on a promontory railway line. The engineers had a hell of an imagination and nerve in 1893 when they built it. It will, therefore, require significant investment. In general, we must be careful not to over-engineer or over-spec the route, and that we get as good value for money as possible so that we can get as many kilometres done as possible, in many instances with minimal intervention and low-cost measures.

During Covid times, we saw what was achieved in Dún Laoghaire. Some might say it is different, but it is not that different. It was a section of roadway on a beautiful seafront. That was completed for a fraction of the cost that people expected because we had a local director of services who was willing to be brave, to think innovatively and to do things differently in experimental ways. I hope TII and Kerry County Council will take the same approach. We will have to spend money on the railway section because it is very special, but the intention is to complete the overall network in a way that does not cost the earth.

Departmental Licences

Deputy Marian Harkin: I want to raise the issue of what I believe is the Minister's intention to grant prospecting licences for base metals, gold and silver ores, in a significant number of townlands in Leitrim. The prospecting licences were initially given to Omagh Minerals but they expired in 2020 and new licences have been applied for by Flintridge, a new company. However, three of its four officers are former officers of Omagh Minerals.

The Minister's intention has come as a shock and a nasty surprise to the local community for a number of reasons. This community, including the farmers, tourism operators, fishermen, and across society in Leitrim and internationally, have campaigned vigorously to ensure that fracking would not be permitted. They did so because they wanted to preserve their landscape, their clean air and water and public health. I am thankful that campaign was successful and I congratulate all those involved, including the former Deputy, Tony McLoughlin, who played an important role.

As I have said, many people are aghast at the idea that, after declaring a climate and biodiversity emergency in 2019, Ireland is considering issuing prospecting licences to the mining industry. During my last term in the European Parliament, some of the most important legislation we put through related to the establishment of the circular economy. This is now on the Statute Book and Ireland has committed to establishing a circular economy. Gold mining has no place within it. In the mining industry, a large number of harmful chemicals that can negatively impact air and water quality are used. These include mercury and cyanide. It is estimated that in order to produce enough raw gold to make a single ring, 20 tonnes of rock and soil are dislodged and discarded. Many people are concerned because they have heard first-hand reports from Omagh of the lived experience of gold mining and of the negative human, societal and environmental damage it has done.

The GeoScience Regulation Office has told us that these are prospecting licences and not mining licences, and that they do not confer any right to mine. Let us look at the reality of that. Companies apply for prospecting licences based on geological information. If such a licence is given, the company involved may then invest money in prospecting and there is a significant expectation that it will apply for a mining licence. This is all the more likely because, last year, global production of gold fell by 1%. Companies are now looking at those deposits that are more difficult to extract.

I mentioned first-hand accounts from Omagh, where a mine has been in operation since the early 2000s. The area in question is significant. One site covers 71 square miles while another covers 96 square miles. There are various ponds, Kearney trenches, polishing ponds and processing plants all in a pristine environment. That is the picture painted by the people of Omagh. If the Minister ever visited the glens of north Leitrim, he would be horrified at the idea that this was even a possibility.

To suggest that prospecting licences are just that and no more is like saying that people who do a driving test and then invest in buying a car are simply doing so to see if they can pass the test. The truth is they are doing it so they can drive a car.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My Department published a notice of intention to grant two prospecting licences in north Leitrim in a local newspaper on 7 October 2021. Submissions on these applications can be made to my Department until 12 midnight on 7 November. Details are

available on the Department's website. All valid submissions will be considered before a final decision is made on whether to grant the two prospecting licences in question.

It is important that we all understand the difference between a prospecting licence and a mining licence or lease and the robust standards that are in place to ensure that both distinct activities meet the highest environmental standards and that people's concerns are addressed. A prospecting licence allows the holder to prospect for specified minerals in a defined geographic area. The majority of prospecting activities carried out under a prospecting licence are temporary and involve minimal disturbance. All proposed exploration activities are the subject of environmental screening by my Department. This ensures they will not give rise to any significant adverse effects on the environment. If a prospecting licence is granted, that licence does not confer the licensee with any rights which would allow it to undertake mining and no intrusive prospecting activities such as drilling or trenching can be undertaken without the express consent of the landowner or tenant. It is also worth noting that very few prospecting licences ever lead to mining.

Mining is a very different activity from prospecting in terms of its scale and potential environmental impact and is regulated accordingly. Mining requires three additional and separate consents. It requires planning permission from the local authority. This involves a full environmental impact assessment and public consultation. To emphasise again the point that a mining authorisation does not automatically follow on from a prospecting licence, I will mention that I am aware of examples of economically viable mineral deposits being discovered only for permission to develop them to subsequently be refused by the relevant planning authority.

An integrated pollution control, IPC, licence from the Environmental Protection Agency is also required. IPC licensing aims to prevent or reduce emissions to air, water and land, to reduce waste and to make sure that energy resources are used efficiently. IPC licensing also involves a full environmental impact assessment and public consultation.

A mining lease or licence is also required. This is sought from me, as the relevant Minister. I would not consider granting a mining licence or lease until after planning permission and an IPC licence have been granted. My Department is currently finalising a draft policy statement on mineral exploration and mining by considering the submissions made as part of a public consultation that concluded on 15 October last. The Government will consider the draft policy statement early next year. The draft policy statement highlights the role of minerals in our everyday lives and the critical role they will play in our transition to net-zero emissions and carbon neutrality by 2050. The draft policy recognises that we need to repair, reuse and recycle more minerals and metals but this alone will not supply the quantity of minerals required to decarbonise our energy system through solar power, renewable wind energy and batteries. Relying solely on imported minerals risks these activities being developed in parts of the world where less stringent environmental and human rights standards apply while also risking our ability to secure the minerals needed to make the green and digital transition a reality.

A key priority in the draft policy statement is to build public understanding of, and trust in, mineral exploration and mining activities. During the course of the public consultation on the draft policy statement, the consent of communities to mining operations and the provision of information that is easily understood emerged as key issues. These issues will be taken forward by my Department with the help of an advisory group on mineral exploration and mining which will be established shortly and which will draw on as broad a range of views as possible.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Minister. This week, every single member of Leitrim County Council supported a motion asking him not to grant a prospecting licence for gold mining. That is a very strong statement. Every single councillor from all the different parties and all independent councillors asked him not to grant this prospecting licence. I mentioned fracking earlier. It is worth noting that petroleum licensing options were granted by a Fianna Fáil-Green Party government. We are lucky that the then Minister, Pat Rabbitte, refused to sign off on a prospecting licence when Fine Gael and Labour were in power in 2011. His decision provided the space for a future Government to reconsider fracking as an option, which happened. The Government in question did the right thing. I now ask the Minister to do the right thing. I do not know how familiar he is with Leitrim. Its farmers will be expected to play their role in ensuring sustainable food production and in sequestering carbon. The burden may be heavier on farmers in this area. To be honest, it beggars belief that any decision the Minister might take could open the door to mining in Leitrim's pristine landscape. He seems to be saying that he would consider granting mining licences. I am shocked by this. He gave the example of conflict minerals, which is off the wall. I listened an earlier response from the Minister in which he mentioned COP 26. He said that this was an opportunity to do things in a better way and to act and think differently. That is what I am asking him to do now. I ask him not to make the mistakes of the previous Fianna Fáil-Green Party Government. I ask him to do things in a better way and not to give permission to companies to prospect for gold in Leitrim.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am very familiar with north Leitrim. The people and the place have a special character. I absolutely support what Tony McLoughlin did, which Deputy Harkin mentioned. There was widespread cross-party support for the ban on fracking, which came from local communities and the Love Leitrim group. That has been significant.

There is a difference. We will need base metals in the low carbon transition we are going to make. Do we decide to import them from other parts of the world which do not have the same environmental standards and regulations? I do not think that would be the right policy. We have gone through a very open public consultation process where we were open to everyone sitting down together. How do we manage that conundrum? There are clearly local concerns. I do not think saying no to any prospecting for any minerals or base metals, including gold or silver, would be the appropriate policy approach.

The Deputy mentioned a metaphor that this is like buying a driver licence. For 50 years, people have been prospecting for gold all over our country and not once has a commercial deposit been found. We have to be careful and put this matter in perspective. There is a real difference between getting a driving licence and driving a car and 50 years of prospecting which has not resulted in a commercial find. The chances of there being such a find are so remote that we should be careful not to raise concerns that might be not be based in reality. If there is a find, it is only then that we need to consider what the licensing or other conditions should be. That would happen through three planning, licensing and ministerial departmental assessments in respect of the environmental circumstances. I do not expect that to be the reality because the experience over 50 years has been that it has not happened. I do not believe it would be right or appropriate for us to close the door completely on any prospecting for base metals in our country.

Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Lorg mé díospóireacht ar an ngéarghá atá ann chun gaelcholáistí nua a bheith lonnaithe sa chathair seo, ach go háirithe i gceantar dheisceart Bhaile Átha Cliath. Tá an t-éileamh ann cheana féin. Tá sé sin cruthaithe. Tá an Stát, toisc nach bhfuil gaelcholáistí ann, ag diúltú do pháistí a dtagann beagnach 500 dóibh in aghaidh na bliana amach as gaelscoileanna sa chuid sin den chathair nach bhfuil spás ann dóibh i ngaelcholáiste. Tá an Stát ag loiceadh ar an dualgas atá orthu gaeloideachas a sholáthar dóibh siúd. Is é sin mar atá sé faoi láthair.

Tá mé ag tabhairt aitheantais don Stát go bhfuil fás ag teacht agus aitheantas ach go háirithe do na tuismitheoirí agus na heagrais atá ag cur na ngaelscoileanna nua chun cinn. Aithnímid é sin ach nuair a thosaíonn gaelscoil nua, caithfidh daoine tosú ag pleanáil láithreach ar ghaelcholáiste. Laistigh de thamall beag, beidh fás thar cuimse ag teacht ar an líon daltaí a bheidh ag dul chuig na gaelscoileanna sna ceantair seo. Faoi láthair, tagann 400 duine as rang 6 gach uile bhliain. Tá sé sin chun fáis laistigh de chúpla bliain go dtí 600. Is iad sin na pleananna atá ann ó thaobh na ngaelscoileanna de; na cinn atá ag méadú agus roinnt cinn nua.

Gan gaelcholáiste nua, beidh an folúntas nó an bhearna idir an t-éileamh agus an spás sna gaelcholáistí ag fás dá réir. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuil mé ag impí ar an Stát seasamh isteach anseo agus déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil cinn ann. Tá na feachtais, na príomhoidí agus na tuismitheoirí tar éis a aithint cá háit ar chóir go mbeidís sin má tá tú ag déileáil leis an bhfás atá ag teacht ó thaobh na ngaelscoileanna de. Is é ceann de na suíomhanna sin a mbeifeá ag smaoineamh air agus a bhfuil talamh le feiceáil, mar go mbíonn sé deacair uaireanta, ná ceantar cosúil le Coill na Silíní.

Chomh maith leis sin, clúdaím mo cheantar féin, a bhfuil an chuid is mó de lasmuigh den cheantar, i mBaile Átha Cliath 10 agus 12. Tá feachtas agus éileamh ansin ar ghaelscoileanna. Níl aon cheann i mBaile Átha Cliath 10 ná 12 agus tá feachtas ann dóibh sin. Bheadh gaelcholáiste nua ag teastáil chun freastal ar an soláthar a bheadh ag teastáil dóibh sin. Tá an Stát taobh thiar sa phleanáil seo. Gan é sin, tá sé ag diúltú do chearta daltaí scolaíocht a bheith acu i nGaeilge ag leibhéal meánscoile.

Chomh maith leis sin, níl mé ag tabhairt san áireamh an méid páistí a théann ó scoileanna Béarla chuig gaelcholáistí agus atá ag lorg é sin. Nuair a bhí mise ar scoil, ní raibh ach dhá ghaelcholáiste sa cheantar, Coláiste Íosagáin do na cailíní agus Coláiste Eoin dúinn féin atá ar an suíomh ceannann céanna. Tá siad fós ann agus tar éis fáis. Nuair a d'fhreastail mise, ba é sin an méid a bhí ann. Nuair a d'fhreastail mé ar bhunscoil ar dtús, ní raibh ach Gaelscoil amháin sa cheantar sin. Tá aitheantas ag dul go bhfuil fás tar éis tarlú ach tá an chuid is mó de sin ag dul do na tuismitheoirí, múinteoirí agus príomhoidí.

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an ábhar seo a ardú. Tugann sé deis dom an seasamh maidir le háiteanna iar-bhunscoile trí mheán na Gaeilge i mBaile Átha Cliath a leagan amach don Teach. Úsáidfidh mé idir Ghaeilge agus Bhéarla sa ráiteas seo. Chun pleanáil a dhéanamh don soláthar scoile, agus anailís a dhéanamh ar na sonraí ábhartha, déanann mo Roinn an tír a roinnt i 314 limistéar pleanála scoile. Úsáidtear córas GIS le sonraí ó raon leathan foinsí le fáil amach cá dtiocfaidh an brú ar áiteanna scoile ar fud na tíre agus cá mbeidh gá le cóiríocht bhreise scoile ag leibhéal na bhunscoile agus na hiar-bhunscoile.

Nuair a léiríonn na sonraí go bhfuil gá le soláthar breise ag leibhéal na bunscoile nó na hiar-bhunscoile, braitheann an soláthar breise sin ar na cúinsí áirithe a bhaineann le gach cás ar leith agus féadfar í a sholáthar trí na modhanna seo a leanas: úsáid a bhaint as acmhainn atá ann cheana i scoil nó scoileanna; acmhainn scoile nó scoileanna a leathnú agus scoil nó scoileanna nua a sholáthar. Déantar próiseas pátrúnachta a réachtáil nuair a chinntear, bunaithe ar anailís agus ar fhianaise, go bhfuil gá le scoil nua. Bíonn an próiseas pátrúnachta seo oscailte do gach comhlacht pátrúin agus do phátrúin nua.

Rinne mo Roinn an próiseas pátrúnachta ar líne a fhorbairt chun faisnéis chruinn a sholáthar do thuismitheoirí a dtabharfaidh deis dóibh rogha eolach a dhéanamh maidir le pátrúnacht agus a rogha teanga teagaisc. Is é sin Gaeilge nó Béarla, do na scoileanna nua.

Parental preferences, as well as other considerations, such as the extent of diversity of provision in an area, including Irish-medium provision, are key to the decision-making process and whether a post-primary school would take the form of an Irish-medium Gaelcholáiste or whether that school, if English-medium, would include an Irish-medium unit or aonad.

Most new post-primary schools must have a student enrolment capacity of between 600 and 1,000 students. A lower threshold of 400 students may apply to Gaelcholáistí, having regard to the alternative of establishing an aonad within the school. Since April 2018, the Government has announced plans for the establishment of 47 new schools from 2019. This includes four new post-primary schools to serve the Dublin city-south Dublin area, two of which have been established as English-medium schools following a patronage process. Síltear go bhfuil dóthain áiteanna scoile sa ghearrthéarma ag na gaelcholáistí atá sa cheantar chun freastal ar an éileamh a tugadh faoi deara mar chuid de na próisis phátrúnachta a tharla le déanaí.

Cuirtear san áireamh freisin líon na ngaelscoileanna nua a osclaíodh le blianta beaga anuas nó atá beartaithe. Ach tá an cás á choinneáil faoi athbhreithniú gníomhach ag mo Roinn de réir mar a fhasann na scoileanna seo agus de réir mar a thagann méadú ar an líon daltaí rang 6 i ngaelscoileanna.

In 2014, two new Gaelcholáistí were established in Dublin city, namely, Gaelcholáiste an Phiarsaigh, in the Ballinteer-Stepaside area, and Coláiste Ghlór na Mara, in Balbriggan. The year of establishment, patronage model and language of instruction have yet to be determined for the new post-primary schools announced to serve the following school planning areas in south Dublin: Dublin 2-Dublin 4 and Sallynoggin-Killiney-Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown-Cherrywood.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Measaim nach dtuigeann an Roinn na figiúirí. Má tá 391 dalta ag críochnú i rang 6 gach uile bhliain agus nach bhfuil ach 150 spás i ngaelcholáistí sa cheantar, tá fadhb bhunúsach ann. Tá 500 dalta a fhreastalaíonn ar ghaelscoileanna nach bhfuil áit ann dóibh i ngaelcholáistí. Mar a dúirt mé, ní thógann sé sin san áireamh iad siúd a théann ar scoileanna Béarla agus atá ag iarraidh dul chuig na Gaelcholáistí chomh maith. Tá an Stát ag loiceadh ar chearta na ndaltaí sin agus a dtuismitheoirí. Mar a dúirt mé, beidh fás air. Tá a fhios againn an fás toisc go bhfuil sé luaite ansin. Luaigh an tAire na critéir atá ann as Béarla. Dúirt sí “most new post-primary schools must have a student enrolment capacity of between 600 and 1,000 students”. Luíonn an figiúr atá á luadh agam leis sin. Ní gá “a lower threshold of 400 students may apply to Gaelcholáistí”. Tá an “threshold” ann cheana féin. Tá na daltaí ann cheana féin. Tá sé cruthaithe le tamall de bhlianta. Ní leor féachaint air seo amach anseo. Tá sé ag tarlú anois agus tá sé cruthaithe ag na scoileanna sin agus na daltaí atá ag freastal ar

bhunscoileanna trí Ghaeilge sna Gaelscoileanna sa cheantar cheana féin.

Deputy Norma Foley: Tuigim go bhfuil an-spéis ag an Teachta san ábhar seo. Tá mo Roinn ag déanamh gach iarracht Gaelscoileanna agus Gaelcholáistí ach go háirithe a chur chun cinn. Faoi mar a dúirt mé cheana, new schools are established by the Department on the basis of identified demographic demand in an area and only after consideration of the capacity of existing schools to absorb the expected school place demand. As already stated in the context of the development of schools, two new Gaelcholáistí were established in Dublin city in 2014, namely, Gaelcholáiste an Phiarsaigh, in the Ballinteer-Stepaside area, and Coláiste Ghlór na Mara, in Balbriggan. The year of establishment, patronage model and language of instruction have yet to be determined for the new post-primary schools announced to serve the following school planning areas: Dublin 2-Dublin 4 and Sallynoggin-Killiney-Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown-Cherrywood. Equally, leanfaidh mo Roinn ag obair chun a chinntiú go bhfuil soláthar scoile an-mhaith ag cathair Bhaile Átha Cliath chun freastal ar an éileamh ar áiteanna scoileanna. Chomh maith leis sin, coimeádfar an riachtanas i mBaile Átha Cliath faoi athbhreithniú mar a tharlaíonn le gach réigiún pleanála scoile eile. Ina theannta sin, leanfaidh mo Roinn i dteagmháil le Comhairle Cathrach Bhaile Átha Cliath maidir le hathbhreithniú ar phlean forbartha na cathrach chun aon riachtanais chóiríochta scoile fadtéarmacha a aithint. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Teachta as ucht na ceiste seo a chur os mo chomhair. Tá súil agam go bhfeiceann sé go bhfuilimid gnóthach sa Roinn ó thaobh na Gaeilge de.

Insurance Industry

Deputy Jackie Cahill: Usually when we talk about insurance in this Chamber, it is in the context of the escalating cost. During questions to the Tánaiste earlier, I said that where the cost of injury claims comes down, the cost of insurance should come down correspondingly, and we had a discussion on that.

This matter, however, is about certain sectors being unable to get any insurance cover. We have seen this creep into the sporting activity sector in recent months, with water sport activities, activity parks and water parks failing to get insurance. One such business in Dromineer, in my county, had to close because of a lack of insurance. Now we have been told ice rinks for the winter period will not get insurance. We see an increasing number of sporting activities failing to get insurance cover, irrespective of the cost.

Now we see this stretching into the equestrian sector. Last weekend, two point-to-point events had to be cancelled because of a lack of insurance. As for the equestrian and hunting sectors, we have 100 packs in this country. We had only one insurance provider in this area but it has now withdrawn. If insurance for hunting packs comes to an end, with different packs at different stages, those hunts will not be able to engage in any activity. Consequently, the organisers of point-to-point events, which operate under the same umbrella, will not be able to operate either. Aside from the recreational aspect of these sports, they are hugely important businesses. They are the cornerstone of our national hunt industry and extremely important financially and to rural Ireland.

We have had the disruption of Covid, which put national hunt breeding under extreme pressure, and we had point-to-point racing cancelled for a number of months. Thankfully, we got the latter resumed, but a second winter of disruption to our activities would be extremely damaging economically. I am talking about the shop window where our young horses are shown

and able to be sold, whether to buyers here at home or to the UK or further afield. A second winter of disruption would impact on the sales of younger horses all through the year. It is imperative therefore that the Government comes up with a solution to this crisis - and a crisis it is. As I said, we have often been in this Chamber arguing about the cost of insurance, but this is a completely different aspect of various sectors of sporting activity being unable to activate insurance at any price.

A substantial claim was awarded on the hunting fields in recent months, and that is the reason being put forward for the insurer leaving the market. That accident happened in my county. The rider involved was severely injured and I understand a substantial payout was received. This is a man with a young family and he will have a lot of costs for the rest of his life. We cannot, however, have a situation in which vital sectors, whether a business involving water activities or any other recreational activity, will be left without insurance cover. As I said, the equestrian industry is massively important to all parts of the country. We just have to come up with a solution to this. We cannot just have insurance companies cherry-picking what they will insure. I am not talking about insurance at any cost because, obviously, no business can afford that. Surely, though, we could have a regulator that would ensure reasonable costs in respect of claims paid out over a number of years and ensure that insurance companies, in order to be allowed to operate in this country, would be forced to give quotes at reasonable costs to all sectors.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I acknowledge the issue raised by Deputy Cahill regarding insurance cover for rural pursuits. Ireland's unique natural amenities not only play a key role from an economic perspective, more importantly, they also serve to enrich the quality of life in communities across the country. Accordingly, I do not take the challenges of both the accessibility and affordability of insurance for outdoor pursuits lightly. The case the Deputy outlines is really about lack of access. The issue of affordability has not featured in the debate because this is an issue of availability of insurance.

It is important I make the point that there is no single policy or legislative initiative which the Government can take to persuade insurers to provide cover for any particular sector or industry. Moreover, neither the Government nor the Central Bank can interfere in the provision or pricing of insurance products, nor do we have the power to direct insurance companies to provide cover to specific businesses or individuals. This legal position is reinforced by the EU solvency directive framework, which is directly on this issue. The only situation in Ireland that I can think of where people have a legal obligation to get insurance is motor insurance in the private motor sector and in those cases, there is a process which refers to the declined cases that have to be dealt with. A person must be given a quote, albeit the price will depend on the risk involved. That is the only element in Irish society where the industry can be forced to provide insurance, and that is in the motor insurance area.

Notwithstanding this, we continue to prioritise insurance reform and work is progressing right across Departments on the timely implementation of all the actions outlined in the action plan for insurance reform. Deputies may be aware that the first action plan implementation report was published in July and it shows that significant progress has been made, with 34 of the 66 actions contained therein now completed, with work also under way on the remainder.

As part of my intensive stakeholder engagement on the reform agenda, I have met many groups to discuss the difficulties in obtaining insurance. Accordingly, I am aware of the exit of a number of UK leisure insurers from the Irish market in recent years. This may affect the areas

referred to by the Deputy, be it ice rinks or some water sports. The Deputy also mentioned hunting and point-to-point races, which are a separate issue. The new personal injuries guidelines were a key element of our action plan that were delivered ahead of schedule. I believe that when fully implemented across all of the cases encompassed by them, it will lead to a reduction in the cost of claims. In its own right, this will help to attract companies back into the sector to provide policies, where they have been slow to do so at the moment. Early indications are that reductions as a result of this have resulted in a 40% reduction in the cost of those claims, which is highly significant.

It is disappointing to hear that difficulties in obtaining insurance cover is affecting rural pursuits. It was brought to my personal attention last week with one of the major brokers in the area, who mentioned it to the Department a few days earlier. The issue has been brought to my attention only in recent days. I assure the House that the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and I will continue to hold insurers to account on previous commitments they have made in this area. A key element will be bringing in the law of occupiers' liability and duty of care. The Minister for Justice is advancing this and it will come before the House shortly.

I recognise the issues and I want to listen further to the particular cases the Deputy has referred to. I will comment on those during my next opportunity in a few moments.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: While I appreciate the Minister of State's answer, we do not have weeks to sort out this issue. It needs to be sorted out immediately. A number of years ago there was a similar issue with access to rural Ireland, whereby landowners were extremely concerned about their liability when people were using their land for recreational purposes. There was a satisfactory solution for that, namely, liability was taken away from the landowner. We need something similar in this case. I suggest that the notion of a waiver by participants in activities is examined by the Government and if a person signs the waiver of any liability, that this would be taken on board by the insurance company to absolve them of any liability to a claim when an adult is participating in an activity. We should see if this idea can be advanced immediately, that is, if a participant signs a waiver, this would take away any potential liability that may be incurred.

Businesses are closing because of lack of insurance but now this hugely important industry for rural Ireland is under immediate threat. We must get a solution to this. I accept the Minister of State's point that we cannot force insurance companies to quote but we must build an environment immediately that will make it economically attractive for insurance companies to quote at a reasonable cost. We cannot just stand idly by and allow a cornerstone industry in rural Ireland to collapse for the lack of insurance cover. We will be failing in our responsibilities as legislators in the Dáil if we allow this to happen. We have a responsibility to these industries, whether it is water activities or other recreational activities and sports that are now failing to get insurance, or the equestrian centres that are a huge cornerstone industry in every county in the country and all across rural Ireland. A huge number of people are employed in this industry, be it in the livery for horses, breeding horses or training horses. This is a hugely important industry and we cannot abdicate our responsibility in this regard. We are legislators and we must ensure that insurance cover is available to all sectors to allow them to continue their businesses.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank Deputy Cahill for highlighting this acute issue that has only come to our attention in the last number of weeks. On this exact point, I received an email just yesterday from one of the county farmers' hunts expressing their anger and frustration at what has happened in this area. In the email I received, they highlighted that the loss of Ireland's

hunting community would have dire consequences for our sport horse industry and point-to-point racing and that the lifeblood of our racing industry would be immediately devastated. I understand the seriousness and that it is not just an issue of recreational activities. As part of the core industry it affects rural Ireland.

I will be meeting the Alliance for Insurance Reform this week. They have established a list of areas where there are particular problems. I want to go through these on a case-by-case basis in relation to the different industries, some of which we have touched on here today, including play centres and outdoor play areas, as well as rural pursuits. We will talk to brokers to see where they can work collectively as groups. Definitely, Deputy Cahill has mentioned what is now a pinch point. I also will meet Insurance Ireland and the insurance companies this month. I will ask each of them to see how it can help collectively in this area.

Reference was made to strengthening the waiver system. I agree completely with Deputy in this regard. This will tie into the duty of care. That system is in place in many places where a person will enter and sign a form to say that he or she is entering at his or her own risk and understands the situation. Unfortunately, in the past when the cases have gone to court the judges have taken a lenient approach and often sided with the person who had the injury, notwithstanding that the person had signed a form, because he or she said that there were some issues in the area they had not known about when they signed the form. The strengthening of a waiver and making it legally binding is definitely to be included in the forthcoming legislation from the Minister for Justice.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.57 p.m. until 9.12 a.m on Wednesday, 3 November 2021.