

Written Answers.

The following are questions tabled by Members for written response and the ministerial replies as received on the day from the Departments [unrevised].

Questions Nos. 1 to 8, inclusive, answered orally.

Capital Programme Expenditure

9. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will outline the proposed quantum of money to be assigned to the sports capital programme and the road capital programme, including maintenance and construction, in view of the revenue raised from the sale of the national lottery; if he intends to allocate the sports capital and road capital money prior to the 2014 local and European elections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47173/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As part of the €200m Stimulus Package announced by the Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform in Budget 2014 additional capital funding is being allocated to my Department's Vote.

I hope that an announcement can be made before the end of the year in relation to a new round of the Sports Capital Programme. The Department has not yet been informed how much money will be in the SCP subhead in 2014 and consequently it is not possible at this stage to give a date for allocations. Minister Ring is due to answer a question on this later in this question session and I will defer to him on this matter.

I understood that an allocation will be directed towards regional and local roads, specifically for road maintenance and repair. This additional investment in 2014, follows on from the €50m Stimulus in 2013 and will offset the significant cut (of €116m) which had been programmed for the Regional and Local Roads funding line for 2014. It is now projected that the overall allocation for this purpose will be €334m (down from €400m in 2013).

It is already acknowledged that there will be no scope for new projects or improvements in 2014 and that while the reduction in funding will be challenging, every effort will be made to make the most of limited resources. My Department's grants are not - and never were - intended to cover the full maintenance cost of regional and local roads. Local authorities have other revenue sources to assist with the funding of such works.

It is expected that the allocation of the road capital stimulus funding for 2014 will be announced along with the normal regional and local and grant allocations early in the New Year.

Questions Nos. 10 and 11 answered orally.

Departmental Funding

12. **Deputy Sandra McLellan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will discuss the 7% reduction to the budget of the Irish Sports Council; his views on what effect this will have on the delivery of front-line services by national governing sports bodies, and on the high performance programme. [47113/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The difficult economic situation is having an impact on public spending across all sectors of society and spending on sport is no different. The cut in the budget for the Irish Sports Council for 2014 currently stands at €3m. It is hoped that we will be able to alleviate that somewhat through adjustments in the Department's Vote but we will have to see the details of the Council's proposals before doing so. Given the very limited resources available, we need to be satisfied that any funding that can be reallocated from other uses will deliver a very substantial additional benefit for sport.

I would point out to the Deputy that the total Sports budget will go up from €74.6m to €93.5m, which is a substantial increase of over 25%. This increase will enable us to launch another round of the Sports Capital Programme and commence work on the long outstanding Indoor Arena at the National Sports Campus. This is welcome news for community sports clubs across the country and will increase participation in sport. Clubs will be able to apply for essential works like new changing rooms, pitches, lighting and other projects for the second time since this Government took office. It will also mean that we will be able to fund regional projects as happened with the last Programme.

This increased funding for sport comes at a time when there are many calls on limited Government resources and demonstrates the Government's commitment to sport and its understanding of its value both to the economy and the health of the nation.

Tourism Data

13. **Deputy Sandra McLellan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if there has been any noticeable increase in visitors from China, India, Brazil, Russia and south east Asia in recent years; the targets he has for these markets; and the strategies that exist to ensure that Ireland increases its penetration of these markets. [47111/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Figures published by the Central Statistics Office show that Irish tourism is enjoying a very good year and all of our main overseas markets are showing growth. For the nine month period between January and September, the number of overseas visits to Ireland increased by 6.4% to over 5.4 million. Visits from North America were up by 14.6%; visits from Mainland Europe were up by 5.1% while visits from Great Britain were up by 3.5% for the nine month period. Due to the relatively small numbers involved, the CSO does not publish individual country breakdowns for other long-haul markets. The Office does provide an overall figure however, and the number of visits from these markets increased by 13.7% compared by the same period in 2012.

Tourism Ireland is the agency with responsibility for the overseas marketing of the Island of Ireland as a holiday destination. The agency continues to roll out major marketing campaigns in all of our main overseas markets and is working hard to put Ireland on the map in emerging markets. This year's activity in this regard includes arranging familiarisation visits for leading travel agents and tour operators from these markets and also cooperative campaigns with airlines and tour operators serving these regions. The Visa Waiver introduced by Government under the Jobs Initiative has assisted greatly in both facilitating more visits from those markets

which are visa-required and also in encouraging operators from those markets to include Ireland in their itineraries.

With regard to tourism strategies for the medium to longer term, Tourism Ireland is currently finalising its three year Corporate Plan to cover the 2014 -2017 period which will, inter alia, outline strategies for each of our main overseas tourism markets. In addition, I am currently engaged in consultations as part of my review of tourism policy, the closing date for responses to which has been extended to the 22nd November, and one of the issues raised is that of Ireland's priority markets/best prospects.

Question No. 14 answered orally.

Departmental Funding

15. **Deputy Timmy Dooley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the resources to be allocated to the Road Safety Authority for the coming year; his views on whether these resources are satisfactory; if he is concerned at the increasing number of deaths on the roads here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47163/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Road Safety Authority (RSA) is funded through a combination of Exchequer and non-Exchequer funding. The detail of the Estimates for my Department in 2014 are currently being finalised. In consultation with the RSA, which has significant income and reserves of its own available, I will ensure that the Authority has adequate resources to fulfil its functions.

At the end of October the number of fatalities on Irish roads was higher than for the equivalent period in 2012. I am concerned at the increase in road fatalities, particularly as the number of road deaths in recent years decreased year on year to the point that 2012 was the safest year on Irish roads since records began in 1959. Both the Gardaí and the RSA meet regularly to discuss the causes of collisions and the steps necessary to reduce them.

All stakeholders involved must continue with the effort and commitment that resulted in year on year reductions over the past seven years. Earlier this year, I launched the Road Safety Strategy 2013-2020 which identifies a total of 144 Actions to be implemented by key stakeholders within the timeframes set. Implementation of these Actions will lead to a further significant reduction in fatalities and serious injuries on our roads.

In addition to the new Strategy, I recently introduced the Road Traffic (No. 2) Bill in the Dáil. The Bill provides for adjustment of penalty points for certain offences, introduces a new concept of novice driver, assists the Gardaí in determining the presence of intoxicants in drivers through an impairment testing system and provides for the testing for intoxicants of drivers left incapacitated by a road collision. The provisions of the Bill will also assist in making our roads safer.

Budget 2014

16. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will outline in detail the way the reduction of €12.9 million in revenue allocation for the tourism section from his Department will impact on that sector in 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47141/13]

37. **Deputy Sandra McLellan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his

views on the 11% reduction in tourism funding in budget 2014; the ramifications for Tourism Ireland's ability to promote Ireland internationally and on Fáilte Ireland's ability to promote Irish holiday destinations domestically and generally on the impact on the tourism industry here. [47115/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 16 and 37 together.

This was a very good budget for tourism with the most significant result being the retention of the reduced VAT rate for the tourism sector. This measure has been critical to reviving the fortunes of this sector since its introduction. This is complemented by the reduction of the air travel tax to zero - the impact of which is already visible in terms of new services.

The industry will also benefit from measures such as the increase in the cash receipts threshold for VAT from €1.25 million to €2 million and the continuation of the diesel rebate for coach tour operators.

In line with the Comprehensive Review of Expenditure, there has been a reduction on the allocation for tourism services, to €123m. The bulk of the saving in current expenditure is accounted for by the ending of once-off funding of the Gathering - some €7m in 2013. The remainder is made up of pay and programme savings as well as operational efficiencies across the tourism agencies. Excluding this, the net reduction is some €9m. However, with the Budget Stimulus package providing an extra €8m for the Wild Atlantic Way project, the real reduction in recurring funding is equivalent to just €1m.

In the first nine months of 2013, overseas visitors to Ireland have increased by 6.4%. The challenge for the tourism sector in 2014 will be to build on the success of this year. I am happy that the provision that is now being made for tourism services this year is sufficient to assist the sector to do just that.

Motor Tax Collection

17. **Deputy Heather Humphreys** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the introduction of a pay as you go motor tax system for the haulage industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47062/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): There are no plans at present to introduce a pay-as-you-go road user charge for HGVs in Ireland.

As the Deputy will appreciate, such a decision would have cross-Governmental implications and could only be taken after extensive consideration. However, the National Roads Authority has carried out preliminary work on the issue of HGV road charging. This work includes identifying the options available, given that there are a number of European Directives in this area; the international experience and trends on road user charging; and the issues that will need to be considered in an Irish context.

Following receipt of this report, I met with the Minister for Environment, Community and Local Government, Phil Hogan TD and we have agreed to establish a cross-Departmental group to consider the matter. The intention is that this group will report in the middle of next year with a recommendation on what direction to pursue based on which we will revert to Government.

I am not seeking to pre-empt the outcome of the group, but if change to a pay-as-you-go road user charge regime is proposed, it is important to state that any changes of such a signifi-

cant nature will require detailed consideration and a considerable lead in time.

Question No. 18 answered with Question No. 14.

Road Safety Statistics

19. **Deputy Noel Coonan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the road safety performance for the year to date; the measures the National Roads Authority is considering to improve road safety; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46950/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): After a record low in the number of road deaths in 2012 and a year-on-year reduction in each of the previous seven years, it appears as if there will be an increase in the number of road fatalities this year and this is of great concern to me. I am aware that the Road Safety Authority (RSA) and the Gardaí meet regularly to discuss the causes of road accidents and the steps necessary to address the issues arising.

Earlier this year I launched the Road Safety Strategy 2013 – 2020, which sets out 144 Actions that will improve road safety. Each Action has a target date for implementation by identified agencies and Government Departments in the period up to 2020.

The RSA has overall responsibility for the Strategy and I have established a Committee to oversee implementation of the Strategy with relevant Ministers, senior Department and Agency officials, and An Garda Síochána represented. This Committee, which I chair, met as recently as last Monday. Every effort is being made to focus the attention of all road users on relevant issues including excessive speed, failure to wear seat belts and driving under the influence of intoxicants.

The National Roads Authority (NRA) was an active participant in developing the Road Safety Strategy and the Strategy is directly feeding into the NRA's work programme for next year and subsequent years. The Actions associated with the NRA include implementation of the EU Road Infrastructure Safety Management Directive on all national roads, implementation of 150 minor realignment schemes on the national road network over the lifetime of the Strategy, a reduction in the number of national access points on the road network and pavement condition improvement.

Public Transport Subsidies

20. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the rationale for the reduction in the State subsidy to Dublin Bus in recent years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47178/13]

53. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide an update on the financial position of Dublin Bus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47118/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 20 and 53 together.

In relation to the question as to the rationale behind the reduction in the level of subvention to Dublin Bus, the answer to that can be found in the state's overall financial position and the significant cuts to public expenditure that have been required as a result.

The Government attaches great importance to the continued operation of Dublin Bus, which is vital to so many of our citizens and to the successful operation of the Irish economy.

Dublin Bus has incurred losses of €72m over the last six years 2008 to 2012 even after receiving considerable subsidies, a position which is unsustainable. During that period it has also received substantial additional support from Government in a number of forms, including €392m in PSO payments, €65m for capital purposes such as the enhancement of services and provision of new buses and €102m to cover the cost of free travel. This comes to a total exchequer funded support of €559m over that five year period. For the years 2013 and 2014 further support of €227m is being provided across these three areas.

For the last full year we have of 2012, the total State support for Dublin Bus across the three headings for PSO, capital support and support to cover the cost of free travel was €118m, a higher figure than at any time since 2008.

Since 2008, Dublin Bus's financial performance has been severely affected by the economic recession which has resulted in a significant reduction in passenger numbers, with a total drop in journeys between the peak in 2007 and 2012 of 22% and by its failure to achieve the required level of cost savings, albeit that significant savings have been achieved. The company developed a 5 year recovery plan (2012-2016) to bring the business back to profitability. The NTA has recently granted further fare increases to the company that will be effective in 2014. The fare increase determination by the NTA assumes the achievement of the cost savings outlined in the Dublin Bus recovery plan.

The total PSO subvention allocated to Dublin Bus by the National Transport Authority (NTA) in 2013 is €65m. In addition, the Exchequer, through the NTA, also provides funding for a rolling renewal programme for the PSO bus fleet. The 2013 allocation for this programme in Dublin Bus is €28m, resulting in the purchase of 80 new buses. A further €21m will be provided to cover the cost of free travel. Bus is still the key public transport mode and it is important we have a reliable and efficient fleet with a reasonable average age.

The total PSO subvention payable to the NTA for 2014 will be €209.7m. (a reduction of €16.8m. from 2013). The allocation of the 2014 subvention, including the amount payable to the three CIE subsidiaries, will be decided by the NTA in accordance with their PSO contracts with the companies. The CIE Group Business Plan has already factored in the expected cut in PSO subvention in 2014 and CIE has negotiated improved bank facilities in relation to refinancing of the Group.

It should be noted that the bus services in Dublin that are not provided by Dublin Bus receive no state support and manage to cover their own costs. Also, Luas operates without operating subsidies from the tax-payer.

City Bikes Scheme

21. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide an update on the extension of the city bikes schemes to other cities outside Dublin. [46969/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Alan Kelly): As the Deputy will be aware, the Programme for Government contains a commitment that to "look to extend the Dublin Bikes Scheme across the wider Dublin area and to other cities and integrate the scheme much more effectively with public transport links." In that regard, I am pleased to report that, led by my colleague Minister Kelly, work is well advanced within the

National Transport Authority on finalising proposals for the provision of public bikes schemes in Limerick, Cork and Galway. Significant progress has been made in relation to the award of the contract for the supply, installation, operation and maintenance of the bike schemes. It is hoped that this contract can be awarded early in 2014 with construction to commence shortly thereafter.

Funding to meet the capital investment costs of public bikes in other cities has been identified within the 5-year capital allocation for Smarter Travel and Carbon Reduction Measures announced in 2012. The delivery of the Regional Cities Bike Scheme was also dependant on a separate process to explore the potential for a sponsorship contract to defray some of the costs associated with the introduction of the Scheme. This process has been completed with the recent announcement that Coca Cola emerged as the successful sponsor for the Scheme.

The vision behind the Scheme is to develop an environmentally friendly means of public transport that is healthy, relatively inexpensive and will ensure an improved quality of life in each of the city's natural and built environment. Public bike schemes have the potential to enhance the city centres and provide a significant boost to the development of a cycling culture. It also adds to the tourism offering in those cities as well.

It has been 4 years since Dublin bikes launched in Dublin city. It has been a resounding success with over 5 million rentals since its launch and 35,000 long term subscribers. Dublin City Council has reported a 40% increase in numbers cycling in the city over the last four years. I look forward to hearing of similar results when the bike schemes are up and running in Limerick, Cork and Galway.

Road Projects

22. **Deputy Paul J. Connaughton** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding the M17-M18 Gort-Tuam motorway; when he expects it to commence; the completion date of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46975/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2007 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Noting the above position, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NRA for direct reply. However for the Deputy's information, it is hoped to achieve financial close in quarter one of 2014. However the PPP process is long and arduous and requires board approval and credit committee approval by several parties and the conclusion of legal agreements.

State Airports

23. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will set out the supports he proposes to give in terms of marketing new routes given the positive reaction from Ryanair to the abolition of the travel tax in respect of Shannon Airport; his views on whether a strong marketing effort would maximise the potential of these routes in terms of inbound traffic to the west; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46979/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The reduction of

the air travel tax to zero from next April is a clear indication of the Government's major support for Irish tourism and air travel generally. In terms of the marketing of any new routes, this is primarily a matter for the airlines themselves. Tourism Ireland, as the agency responsible for the overseas promotion of Ireland as a tourist destination, also works with airlines and others to promote inbound tourism on routes from our key overseas markets. Accordingly, I have also referred the Deputy's Question to Tourism Ireland for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Road Projects Status

24. **Deputy Michelle Mulherin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding the progress of the N26-N5-N58 road project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46945/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2007 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Noting the above position, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NRA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Public Transport Subsidies

25. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if there has been a cost benefit analysis conducted into the impact of planned further reductions in Government subvention to CIE and the consequential fare hikes being imposed on passengers. [46851/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Alan Kelly): I refer the Deputy to the reply to Priority Question Nos. 1 and 2 which were answered earlier.

The total PSO subvention payable to the NTA for 2014 will be €209.7m, a reduction of €16.8m. from 2013. The allocation of the 2014 subvention, including the amount payable to the three CIE subsidiaries, will be decided by the NTA in accordance with their PSO contracts with the companies. The CIE Group Business Plan has already factored in the expected cut in PSO subvention in 2014 and CIE has negotiated improved bank facilities in relation to refinancing of the Group.

Rural Transport Programme Funding

26. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the reduced funding allocated to the rural transport programme for 2014 will result in reduced services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47161/13]

50. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the funding intentions for the rural transport programme into the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47179/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Alan Kelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 26 and 50 together.

The budget allocation for the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) in 2014 is €9.446 million which includes €950k in Community Service Programme funding that is being transferred from the Department of Social Protection Vote. The 2013 RTP allocation is €9.633 million including a one-off provision of €500k for restructuring.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has responsibility for implementing the restructuring programme.

The purpose of the restructuring of the RTP is to protect the provision of rural transport services into the future. The new model for the delivery of rural transport services involving the establishment of 18 Transport Coordination Units in place of the existing 35 RTP Groups, will allow for the maximising of spend on services and the reduction of administration costs, thereby ensuring that the resources available are dedicated to the greatest extent possible to the provision of transport services to those in rural communities who need them.

I am advised by the NTA that during the restructuring of the RTP, its priority is to ensure the uninterrupted continuation of existing RTP services. In this regard the NTA's focus is to move the existing RTP services into contracted services with the NTA, whether directly with the operators, or with the fleet owning groups. At the same time the NTA will examine existing contracted services to ensure that they are meeting current demands. Based on the current funding available, the NTA has no plans to modify or reduce specific services.

Road Projects

27. **Deputy Tony McLoughlin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has had any recent discussion with his Northern Ireland Executive Minister counterpart regarding the national primary route N16 which forms part of the east-west corridor linking Northern Ireland with the Republic and more specifically linking Sligo and Leitrim and much of Connaught with Belfast, Larne and Dundalk on the east coast; if he acknowledges that this route was designated by the EU as one of the east-west links forming part of the trans-European road network, recognising its strategic importance in linking the peripheral north west with Belfast and the north-eastern ports and that it is the main access route for commercial traffic, tourists and social travel from the north-east to the west and vice versa; and if he will give assurances that some priority for funding under a cross-Border initiative will be forthcoming. [47063/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department maintains regular contact with its counterparts in Northern Ireland and will continue to liaise with a view to assessing the scope for drawdown of funding for road projects under the TEN-T Regulation.

I would have to note, however, that any funding contribution from TEN-T would be quite limited with the bulk of the funding needing to come from the Exchequer. This does constrain the scope for considering cross border road development projects in the current financial climate.

The Gathering Initiatives

28. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the work

his Department and the agencies under his aegis are carrying out in relation to building on the legacy of The Gathering. [46968/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Gathering Ireland 2013 aimed primarily to generate additional tourist numbers and revenue in 2013. However, it also aimed to have a longer-term impact. We set a target of 325,000 visitors and we are well on the way to meeting that. But The Gathering was never just about visitor numbers and revenues. It is also about community pride and strengthening links with the diaspora.

The Gathering helped to strengthen existing links with Irish communities abroad and create new connections. Tourism Ireland will continue to work with the diaspora networks and will include this global family as part of its future promotional work overseas. The networks and databases created through The Gathering will also remain as a valuable asset to Irish tourism.

A number of Gathering related events and festivals have already been identified as having potential to run again. Similarly, the success of the Emerald Isle Classic college football game, which was a key part of the marketing campaign for the Gathering, is being built on with next year's game between Penn State – with the largest alumni association in the US - and the University of Central Florida in Croke Park.

The Gathering also made a vital contribution to the local community. The Gathering network provided extensive training to more than 2,500 people and these community engagement skills will endure and be available to support other local events.

The work of the agencies in this regard are operational matters for Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland and I am referring the Deputy's question to the agencies for their direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Tourism Promotion

29. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has considered providing State support for an enhanced Hallowe'en festival here in view of the Celtic origins of Samhain and the extent to which Hallowe'en is celebrated around the world, particularly in Britain and the US; if his attention has been drawn to the potential boost to tourism such a festival may represent in view of the large sums spent on Hallowe'en festivities in Ireland's major tourism markets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47116/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): The provision of funding for festivals and events which have associated tourism benefits is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland and it is open to the promoters of festivals to make an application to the agency for funding. Details of the application process are advertised in the national press and online on the Fáilte Ireland website. The application process for 2014 has not yet been advertised.

I am not aware of a specific proposal for a new Halloween festival, but I would encourage the promoters of any such festival - or indeed any new or innovative tourism proposals - to engage with Fáilte Ireland with a view to maximising the tourism potential of any such proposal.

I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for further information and reply. Please contact my private office if you do not hear back from the agency within ten working days.

Integrated Ticketing

30. **Deputy Seán Kyne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the progress to date of implementing integrated ticketing, including Leap card, at locations outside of Dublin such as Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46948/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Alan Kelly): Responsibility to develop, procure, implement, operate and maintain the integrated ticketing Leap Card system in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) became a function of the National Transport Authority (NTA) with effect from 30th September 2010. In addition, section 63 of the Dublin Transport Authority Act, 2008 extends the Authority's remit in relation to integrated ticketing to the rest of the State.

Noting this I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Public Transport

31. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will examine the high failure rate of the knowledge test element of the small public service vehicle test; if he is satisfied that the knowledge test that is being applied adequately reflects the geographical area where a person is likely to serve; his views on whether a person from a large county is at a disadvantage and is more likely to fail the knowledge test because of its current construction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46947/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Alan Kelly): The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including the operation of the area knowledge test and SPSV Skills Development Programme, is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the provisions of the Public Transport Regulation Act, 2009.

I have referred your Question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within 10 working days.

Question No. 32 answered with Question No. 14.

Travel Tax

33. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the response of the airline industry to the abolition of the travel tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47117/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The zero rate travel tax initiative is part of a process aimed at generating new airline routes into Ireland and will come into effect from April 2014. There has been a positive response to the initiative from airlines so far with Ryanair and Aer Lingus Regional both announcing details of new routes and increased services from Dublin, Shannon, Cork and Knock.

Ryanair has said it will grow its traffic at Irish airports by at least 1m passengers per annum from April 2014 in response to this initiative. To date it has announced new routes and additional services at Shannon and Knock which account for around 380,000 passengers of this

planned 1m increase and will support in the region of 380 jobs. Aer Lingus Regional has also announced a 10% increase its flights from Cork and Dublin.

I would like to see further announcements of this kind from these and other airlines in respect of the various Irish airports. More flights into Ireland at more locations will mean more visitors from overseas, and a bigger tourism dividend. The airports and Tourism Ireland have attractive incentive and marketing programmes available which will help support new services and build on the success of The Gathering in the months ahead.

Road Projects

34. **Deputy Tony McLoughlin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his Department and the National Roads Authority will consider funding to Sligo County Council which is seeking design funding on their part of the N16 to develop a scheme which could be ready for construction in a number of years time (details supplied). [47064/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2007 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Within its capital budget, the assessment and prioritisation of individual projects is a matter in the first instance for the NRA in accordance with Section 19 of the Roads Act.

Noting the above position, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NRA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Road Network

35. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to deal with increasing deterioration of the road network here in view of recent spending cuts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47187/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport I have responsibility for overall policy and funding for the national roads programme. The implementation of individual national road projects is a matter for the National Roads Authority, NRA, under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2007, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from local authorities own resources supplemented by State road grants.

The amount of public funding available for the road network has reduced significantly over the last number of years and the reality of the situation is that the amount of money available does not match the work that needs to be done. In these circumstances the NRA and local authorities have to focus primarily on the maintenance and rehabilitation of roads.

It is worth noting however, that an additional €50 million under a mini-stimulus plan was provided to local authorities in June this year for works on regional and local roads and a further €50 million has been announced for next year. This funding next year means that the intended cut of €116 million under the roads capital budget for 2014, will now be a smaller adjustment of €66 million. This does, however, remain a very challenging reduction but every effort will be made to make the most out of the very limited resources.

Rail Services

36. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has had any discussions with Irish Rail in relation to the cut in DART carriages operating at peak times and the rationale for same. [47188/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I refer the Deputy to Minister of State Kelly's reply to the Topical Issue on this matter on Tuesday, 22nd October. Concerns on this subject have been raised with the Chief Executive of Irish Rail and I understand that Irish Rail have already responded and re-introduced larger carriages to accommodate passengers where this has been considered necessary. The Chief Executive has agreed to continuous monitoring of carriage levels to ensure they match passenger demand.

Question No. 37 answered with Question No. 16.

Wild Atlantic Way Project

38. **Deputy Seán Kyne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will outline the investment plans, with indicative timetable, that his Department has for the next three years for the Wild Atlantic Way tourism initiative. [46949/13]

40. **Deputy Jim Daly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide an update on the current plans and funding arrangements to develop the Wild Atlantic Way; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46952/13]

43. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to invest in the Wild Atlantic Way in the coming years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47061/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 38 , 40 and 43 together.

The Wild Atlantic Way is set to be Ireland's first long-distance touring route, stretching along the Atlantic coast from Donegal to West Cork. It is planned to develop it into an attraction of international scale, on a par with the Garden Route in South Africa or the Great Ocean Road in Australia, that will achieve greater visibility for the west coast of Ireland in overseas tourist markets. It will be a central feature of our overseas promotion efforts through Tourism Ireland in 2014, as we bring Ireland's magnificent scenery to the world, and I understand the overseas tourist trade has already given the product a strong endorsement.

I was pleased to welcome the announcement in Budget 2014 of an additional €8 million in capital investment for the Wild Atlantic Way. I am informed that this funding will ensure the completion of route signage, provide for the development and enhancement of discovery points on the route as well as other infrastructural improvements.

While my Department provides the capital funding for investment in tourism product such as the Wild Atlantic Way, it is not directly involved in developing or managing such product. The development of the Wild Atlantic Way is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland and I have referred the Deputy's question to the agency for further information in relation to its future development. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Public Service Obligation Services

39. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans for the tendering out of Dublin Bus routes to private firms and the implications this will have for the terms and conditions of Dublin Bus drivers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47177/13]

51. Deputy Mick Wallace asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the analysis he has undertaken into the impact of the ending of Dublin Bus's five year public service obligation contract in 2014 and the reduction of its subsidy by a further €4.5 million; if he will ensure that this will not be another taxi style deregulation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46898/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 39 and 51 together.

The objective of Government is to ensure a system of public transport throughout the country that is as efficient and as widespread as possible. In relation to the award of Public Service Obligation (PSO) contracts for the bus market, this falls under the remit of the National Transport Authority (NTA). The NTA is currently considering how best publicly subvented bus services will be provided in the future. The direct award contracts for the provision of PSO bus market services held by Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann expire late next year. The awarding of the licenses for the services thereafter is a matter for the NTA, and not for Government, but I have kept the Cabinet updated on the process.

Where the NTA proposes to enter into a further direct award contract or contracts for bus services it is obliged to carry out a statutory consultation under section 52 of the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008. Under the legislation, if the NTA proposes to enter into direct award contracts, the relevant section states that "it may only do so where it is satisfied that the continued adequacy of the public bus passenger services to which the contracts relate can only be guaranteed in the general economic interest by entering into such direct award contracts". If it is not so satisfied, it must provide for some level of competitive tendering. As explained above, this is not a decision for the Government or for me.

The NTA conducted its work in accordance with the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008 and statutory consultations in relation to the matter commenced on 11th September and concluded on 11th October. The NTA expects to announce its decision on how it intends to proceed before the end of the year.

It should be noted that it will be open to Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann to tender for any routes or bundles of routes that are tendered. The contract will go to the best competent tenderer who can provide the best service for the least subsidy. I would be disappointed if the outcome of tendering is anything other than an improvement in services or no reduction in service at the very least.

The NTA noted in its consultation document "Proposal to Directly Award a Public Bus Services Contract to Dublin Bus in 2014" that "tendering in the order of 10% of the services would ... leave 90% of services with Dublin Bus, a manageable downsizing to be planned for and achieved by that company."

Question No. 40 answered with Question No. 38.

Question No. 41 answered with Question No. 14.

Public Transport Provision

42. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide comparative figures for the amount of subvention paid to Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus compared to other European public bus services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47180/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): It is difficult to carry out a comparison of subvention levels between transport authorities internationally for a number of reasons, some of which are:

- The subvention payments for the bus mode are not normally separated out from the other modes such as light and heavy rail and are usually presented as the subvention for all the public transport in the particular region;
- Some transport operators and authorities report transport revenues as a single item and do not identify the revenue associated with subvention;
- Some transport authorities centralise the marketing and customer facing activity which does not get reflected in the provision to operators.

The 2009 Deloitte Report, Cost and Efficiency Review of Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann highlighted that grants and subsidies to other comparable bus operations outside Ireland varied greatly. The Report also noted that it was more difficult to identify comparable operators for Bus Éireann given their mix of services.

While the Deloitte Report is frequently cited as providing a Europe-wide comparison of PSO levels to bus operators, this is not the case and it is wrong to represent the study as such. The Deloitte Report compared the PSO provided to Dublin Bus to the subsidies provided to operators in Brussels, Zurich, Amsterdam, Lyon and London and in the case of Bus Éireann, compared the PSO received by it to national operators in the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland. It is unsound to draw European wide conclusions from such a limited data-set. Despite the limitations in developing such analyses, I am advised that on the basis of recent research undertaken on behalf of the National Transport Authority (NTA), the subvention levels for operations similar to Bus Éireann vary between 32% and 70%. This is based on a comparison of subvention levels in 4 countries, namely, Belgium, Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland.

If the Public Service Obligation payment is the only subsidy considered, the subvention to Bus Éireann in 2012 was 35% of their total PSO revenues. However if the payment for the Free Travel Scheme is included, 46% of Bus Éireann revenues are subsidised by the State. This places Bus Éireann in the low to middle of the range of subsidy payments of those countries compared. In the NTA's recently published economic analysis of Direct Award Bus Contract in the Dublin market, it was stated that a comparative analysis of subvention levels across Europe indicated that levels of public transport subvention vary between 35 and 60 percent of revenue. It added that when all State interventions (including the PSO subvention, Free Travel Scheme, tax foregone as a result of the Tax saver scheme, emergency funding and funding for the purchase of new buses) are taken into account, the level of subvention to Dublin Bus is at the upper end of the range and approaches 50%.

Question No. 43 answered with Question No. 38.

Questions Nos 44 to 46, inclusive, answered with Question No. 14.

Question No. 47 answered with Question No. 11.

Roadworthiness Testing

48. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will review the regulations covering the vehicle roadworthiness certification; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46849/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The arrangements for commercial vehicle testing in the State were comprehensively reviewed in 2007 and the Government decided that the model for delivery of testing by private operators would continue and that the authorisation and supervision of commercial vehicle testing would be centralised under the auspices of the Road Safety Authority (RSA) to ensure consistency of testing across the country. The Road Safety Authority (Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness) Act 2012 provides the powers to the RSA to undertake this function.

The RSA is currently in the process of rolling out major reforms in the testing system, which will deliver an enhanced service for the customer. Apart from safer roads for all road users, the reforms are designed to level the competitive playing field for commercial vehicle operators by reducing non-compliance with testing and roadworthiness requirements. The new system will deliver several administrative benefits for operators, including online booking systems, reducing vehicle paperwork to be brought to the test and centralised issuing of the certificate of roadworthiness. No increase in testing frequency has taken place as a result of the reforms. Under EU law, commercial vehicle owners are obliged to test their vehicles annually and it is an offence to use commercial vehicles on public roads without a certificate of roadworthiness (CRW).

From 7th October last, a new annual fee, which includes a road safety levy, was introduced. The commercial vehicle reform process has been worked on since 2007 and there has not been any increase since then. The RSA consulted industry on the reforms and the planned road safety levy in November 2011 and the actual levy is lower than that proposed in the public consultation. There have been a number of awareness raising measures of the reforms over the summer months and the new fees were advertised in national newspapers on 3rd October 2013 and are available in full on the RSA website. The levy is also funding enhanced supervision, enforcement and compliance measures being introduced at the roadside and at operator premises. A risk rating system is also being introduced so that roadside enforcement activity is targeted at higher risk operators ensuring that compliant operators are less likely to experience disruption to their daily business.

Questions No. 49 answered with Question No. 14.

Question No. 50 answered with Question No. 26.

Question No. 51 answered with Question No. 39.

Sports Facilities Provision

52. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide a progress report on developments at the national sports campus; if he will detail the planned expansion of facilities there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46971/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): A significant amount of work is taking place at the National Sports Campus which will see a number of facilities completed this year and more to come on stream in the short to medium term. Irish

Sport HQ has been completed and now is the administrative headquarters of almost 20 NGBs. Work is almost complete on the development of multi-sport all-weather floodlit pitches. It is anticipated that these pitches will be open to the public in December. Work is underway on a pavilion and car park for the facility. I officially opened the National Horse Sport Arena on 9 October and work on a new National Diving Training Centre was completed in September. A National Modern Pentathlon Training Centre, accommodating the fencing and shooting aspects of Modern Pentathlon has been completed which, together with the existing facilities at the National Aquatic Centre and the National Horse Sport Arena, means that the National Sports Campus is one of the few facilities in Europe where training for all Pentathlon disciplines can be accommodated on one site.

Agreements are in place among the National Sports Campus Development Authority and the FAI, GAA, IRFU and IHA to develop field-sport facilities for each of their respective sports. Preparatory works have commenced on the GAA and FAI elements. A new access road has been completed which will open up the site for the development of these facilities. Remaining elements of the National Sports Campus, including community pitches, high performance training and rehabilitation facilities and athlete accommodation, will continue to be developed incrementally in line with available exchequer funding. One of the elements of the National Sports Campus that remains to be developed is a National Indoor Training Arena. The announcement in the Budget that funding will be made available from the proceeds of the sale of the National Lottery licence to allow this development to commence is very welcome news for Irish sport. This is one of the final pieces of major sporting infrastructure in Ireland and work will commence on this next year.

Question No. 53 answered with Question No. 20.

Regional Airports

54. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will report on his discussions with the management of Ireland West Airport, Knock; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46848/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Recent discussions with the management of Ireland West Airport Knock (IWAK) have taken place through the Study Group, which comprises a broad range of parties interested in the development of the Airport and was established, under the Chairmanship of Deputy John O'Mahony, following a meeting of the Airport Board with the Taoiseach, Minister of State Ring and myself.

The Group is, inter alia, examining how best the future of the Airport can be secured; exploring options for the survival and growth of the Airport and examining how the Airport can best support industry and tourism in the catchment it serves. They are considering how the airport can be further developed taking account of available funding and competition rules and having regard to the implications for other regional airports.

Work by the Group is ongoing. After their most recent meeting, I understand that the Group is endeavouring to finalise its report and submit it to the Taoiseach and myself before Christmas.

Tourism Policy

55. **Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to examine the issue of cruise tourism in the tourism policy review; if his attention has been drawn to Dún Laoghaire Harbour's plans to extend its cruise liner facilities. [46967/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Tourism Policy Review is designed to look at all aspects of Irish tourism and the issues paper that Minister Ring and I launched on 11 September has a specific section dealing with product development. I am inviting all stakeholders to make their views on the issues known to my Department. The level of interest has been such that I have extended the deadline for receipt of responses to the public consultation to 22 November after which a detailed analysis of all responses will commence.

Regarding the specific issue of the development of cruise facilities, this is one of those areas where my transport brief closely relates to my tourism brief as it is also related to ports policy. I am keen to ensure that there is a consistency of approach in all policy areas under my Department and that the tourism and ports policy, as with the forthcoming aviation policy, are closely aligned. The broad area of where cruise tourism fits and how it can be best supported in overall tourism policy will be considered as part of the review referred to above.

I am aware that a number of ports including Dun Laoghaire Harbour have plans in this area as part of their development Masterplans. As the Deputy is aware, it is important to recognise that the cruise industry is not a lucrative source of revenue for port companies themselves as opposed to the economy of the hinterland. It can be difficult for investments in this area to remunerate themselves from the charges of ports levies. Being commercially state-owned enterprises, ports must fund all cruise infrastructure developments must be funded by the ports from their own resources on a commercial basis or through collaboration with those beneficiaries of cruise tourism, be they regional interests or the cruise operators themselves.

Excise Duties

56. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if his Department will assist a company (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47532/13]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Eamon Gilmore): I am aware of the situation facing the company to which the Deputy refers. I share the Deputy's concerns and fully understand the frustration of the company at the long delay in reimbursing excise duty due to them for the years in question. I am particularly concerned by the risk which this delay poses to the viability of the company, and the livelihoods of all involved. At my request, the Irish Ambassador to Belgium met recently with senior officials of the Belgian Customs Service to directly express our concern about the situation and to highlight the serious impact of this on the company's operations. The officials advised our Ambassador that Customs will be in contact with the company shortly concerning these claims. The Embassy in Brussels will remain seized of the issue and I will contact the Deputy as soon as there is further information to report.

Diplomatic Representation

57. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the Irish diplomatic presence in the Slovak Republic; if he will provide a breakdown of the costs of running the office there in the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47539/13]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Eamon Gilmore): The Embassy to the Slovak Republic opened in 2001. Our diplomatic presence in Bratislava is important in the context of shared membership of the European Union, in advancing relationships, promoting our interests and fostering goodwill between our two countries. From an economic perspective, and given that the state agencies service the market from regional offices, the Embassy has an important role in the promotion of exports, tourism and inward investment. The Embassy performs a wide range of functions in the context of our foreign policy, including representing and advancing government policies with the Slovakian government. In addition, the Embassy delivers frontline consular and passport services to citizens, and engages with and supports the Irish community. Since 2012, the Embassy has been staffed by only one diplomatic officer, with the rank of Ambassador, with the support of two locally engaged staff. A breakdown of the running costs of the Embassy from 2009 to the present is set out in the table below. The figures include all expenditure items charged to Mission budgets. Salaries and related costs of staff posted from Ireland are not included as they are a charge on the overall budget of the Department.

Bratislava Mission Expenditure- All figures in Euro	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013 to 05/11/2013
Local staff salaries, foreign representation and accommodation	131,975	137,298	138,986	92,438	56,302
Travel and subsistence	4,157	2,714	2,302	1,565	4,495
Incidental expenses	9,944	9,251	8,849	5,781	2,682
Postal and telecommunications	7,585	6,846	7,970	6,286	3,818
Office machinery and other office expenses	770	929	835	1,329	560
Office premises expenses	255,138	200,965	197,813	186,683	148,217
Total	409,568	358,004	356,755	294,081	216,074

Diplomatic Representation

58. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when he expects to review the yearly operation of Irish embassies abroad; his plans to re-open the Irish Embassy to the Holy See, as a new administration is now in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47540/13]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Eamon Gilmore): The scale and presence of our diplomatic network is considered by the Government on an ongoing

ing basis. Any decision to adjust the state's external representation, including the opening of missions, will have regard to national priorities and available resources. At present, Ireland's diplomatic network includes 56 Embassies, 7 multilateral missions and 10 Consulates General and other offices. In addition to their country of residence, several Ambassadors are accredited also to further countries on a non-residential basis which enhances the cost-effectiveness of our external representation. The decision to close the resident Embassy to the Holy See was taken by the Government in response to economic circumstances and on the basis of an assessment as to the impact of budgetary cuts, and the need to focus our modest diplomatic network on economic recovery. In the case of the Holy See also, there are very clear requirements regarding the physical separation of Embassies to Italy and the Holy See. It is not possible for an Ambassador to be accredited to both States simultaneously, neither is it acceptable to the Holy See for them to reside at the same address. Contacts on issues of mutual interest between Ireland and the Holy See are being advanced by means of an Ambassador accredited on a non-resident basis – the Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mr David Cooney. The Government will continue to review our network of diplomatic missions to ensure that it most effectively meets Ireland's current needs, consistent with the resources available.

Northern Ireland Issues

59. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will outline the proposals he conveyed to Ambassador Richard Haass during their recent meeting; if his Department forwarded a written submission on these all-party talks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47569/13]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Eamon Gilmore): I met with Dr Richard Haass on 31 October in Iveagh House. We had met previously in New York on 25 September and have agreed to keep closely in touch. I believe that close and ongoing contact with Dr Haass and his team is preferable to a formal submission at this stage in his consultative process. During these meetings, we discussed each of the issues that he has been asked to address by the Northern Ireland Executive including parades, flags and emblems and the past. Dr Haass has committed to concluding his work by December and, to that end, he has embarked on an ambitious programme of work. I am very supportive of the process of consultation with wider society undertaken by Dr Haass and his team. I believe that this is an essential component to a successful process.

The Government believes that the process presents an opportunity to reaffirm the commitments made throughout the hard-won peace process and to making further progress towards advancing reconciliation and the creation of a truly reconciled and prosperous society in Northern Ireland.

During our meetings to date, I have assured Dr Haass that he and his team have the full support of the Government in the pursuit of their work and that we are ready to assist them in any way we can. Dr Haass and I have agreed to remain in close contact and meet again in the coming weeks.

Northern Ireland Issues

60. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his participation in the Economic Investment Conference held in Belfast on 10 and 11 October 2013; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47570/13]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Eamon Gilmore): Officials from my Department attended the Northern Ireland Economic Investment Conference in Belfast in early October. This conference allowed excellent networking with representatives from the Northern Irish business sector. Attendance at the Conference was another example of the very good relations between the UK and Ireland which Prime Minister Cameron attested to in his address to the conference. Prime Minister Cameron's comments on the collaborative work being undertaken between the two Governments is reinforced in the UK's economic package for Northern Ireland "Building a Prosperous and United Community" which acknowledges the need for the UK Government and NI Executive to work with the Irish Government with the aim of supporting economic growth and a shared society with equality of opportunity for all in Northern Ireland. I spoke of this in my address to the Chamber of Commerce during my recent visit to Derry.

At the Belfast Conference the Prime Minister also referred to the ongoing work to establish common visa arrangements across the UK and Ireland which could have significant economic benefits for business across the island.

My decision to involve Northern Ireland companies in the recent Global Irish Economic Forum has been heartily welcomed by those companies and by the NI business sector. I and my Department officials will continue to engage fully with Northern Ireland business and government representatives for the benefit of the economy of the island as a whole.

Northern Ireland Issues

61. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has been engaged in any discussions on the Together: Building a United Community Strategy; if he will outline any detailed proposals he has brought forward on this work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47571/13]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Eamon Gilmore): I have previously welcomed the publication in May 2013 by the NI Executive of a new strategy '*Together: Building A United Community*'. The publication of the strategy is an important acknowledgement of the ongoing blight of sectarianism across communities in Northern Ireland and recognition that building a shared society requires a comprehensive response across political, economic, civic and social life. Building relationships between divided communities takes time and sustained effort and will need to be at the core of the work of the NI Executive, NI Party Leaders and the NI Assembly for some time to come. The Government will continue to support all efforts by the Executive and political leaders in Northern Ireland to promote reconciliation. The priority now, in my discussions with the Parties in Northern Ireland, is to encourage and support them in implementing the Strategy to its fullest extent, both in terms of promoting an ethos of respect and reconciliation and in implementing fully the individual practical proposals as set out in the Strategy. I welcome the rapid implementation of the proposal in the strategy to establish an All-Party Group, under the independent Chairmanship of Dr. Richard Haass, to consider and make recommendations on difficult matters including parades and protests; flags, symbols, emblems and related matters; and the past. I met with Dr. Haass on 25 September and 31 October in Dublin and assured him that he and his team have the full support of the Government.

In my discussions with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, with the First and deputy First Minister, and with other members of the Northern Ireland Executive, I continue to encourage all parties to seize the opportunity provided by the new Together Building a United Community Strategy and by the All-Party talks to accelerate the realisation of a cohesive and

united community based on tolerance and respect in Northern Ireland. The ‘*Together: Building A United Community*’ strategy was also discussed at the North South Ministerial Council Plenary held in Dublin on 5 July 2013.

The EU funded PEACE and Interreg programmes have made an important contribution to supporting peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and our border counties and I am glad that support for this valuable work will continue in the 2014 – 2020 period. I am particularly pleased that during our Presidency the European Council decided to include a special allocation of €150 million for a new PEACE Programme in the Multiannual Financial Framework. It is clear that the PEACE programme in particular has considerable potential to focus on the key issues of youth employment and tackling marginalisation, which are also to the fore in the “Together Building a United Community” strategy.

The Government will also continue to support reconciliation in other ways, including through the Reconciliation and Anti-Sectarianism Funds, which provide grants to organisations involved in reconciliation work on a cross-community and cross-border basis. We will also continue to support commemorative initiatives and events in Northern Ireland which foster reconciliation and mutual understanding among the different communities on the island. On 30 October, I hosted a Reconciliation Networking Forum in Dublin Castle which brought together groups supported by the Funds, along with representatives of business, religions, politics and broader civil society. This Forum considered the role of civil society fifteen years after the Good Friday Agreement and its conclusions will help to inform a new reconciliation policy that is currently being prepared by my Department. I continue to engage with representatives of communities and wider society on issues relating to reconciliation, most recently on my visit to Derry last month.

Property Taxation Assessments

62. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Finance the position regarding payment of over valuation of a property in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Wicklow. [47476/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised by Revenue that, where liable persons overpay their Local Property Tax (LPT) through an error or mistake in valuing their property, they should write to LPT Branch, Government Buildings, Ennis, Co Clare clearly setting out how the overpayment arose. They should also include relevant documentation in support of their revised valuation such as, for example, a copy of a professional valuation as at 1 May 2013, or documented information on property sales for comparable properties in the local area or any house price survey in the area reflecting values around 1 May 2013. In the case referred to by the Deputy, I am informed by Revenue that the person in question submitted his LPT1 Return on the 12 May 2013, which clearly indicated ‘Band 2’ (valuation €100,001 - €150,000) as the appropriate valuation band for his property. A payment of €56 was subsequently received on 9 July 2013 equating to exactly half the ‘Band 2’ amount due for 2013. No further correspondence was received from the taxpayer in relation to the valuation submitted, nor was any further payment received.

A letter subsequently issued from Revenue to the person in question on 18 October 2013, requesting payment of €225 for 2014, based on the ‘Band 2’ valuation.

Revenue has confirmed to me that if the person in question wishes to amend his valuation band downwards, he should follow the steps already outlined above. Once the relevant documentation is received, LPT Branch will make direct contact with him to discuss the issue. If it is

confirmed that the correct band for his property is 'Band 1' rather than 'Band 2' then the excess payment can either be transferred as part payment to his 2014 liability or refunded to him.

Finally, the person can pay his LPT liability through the Post Office as suggested by the Deputy. Any subsequent adjustments that might arise can be made once the correct valuation band has been confirmed.

Credit Availability

63. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Finance if any assistance is available for a person (details supplied) in County Kildare who opened a business as a sole trader in the past month; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47419/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): Facilitating access to finance for SMEs is a key aspect of the Action Plan for Jobs 2013. It is the Government's vision that all viable businesses operating in Ireland should have the opportunity to access sufficient finance to meet their enterprise needs in a manner that supports growth and employment in the economy. The Government has imposed SME lending targets on AIB and Bank of Ireland for the three calendar years, 2011 to 2013. Each bank was required to sanction lending of at least €3 billion in 2011, €3.5 billion in 2012 and €4 billion in 2013 for new or increased credit facilities to SMEs. Both banks have reported that they achieved their 2011 and 2012 targets and the recent Credit Review Office quarterly report commented "both banks are on track to achieve their €4bn loan sanction targets, assuming the pattern of previous years of a strong Q4 performance is repeated."

AIB and Bank of Ireland are expected to lend to viable businesses both for investment and working capital purposes. The Credit Review Office is available to assist businesses which have been refused credit. The recent CRO report shows that the Credit Review Office upheld the credit appeal in 150 cases or 55% of cases decided. The upheld appeals have resulted in €18.5m credit being made available to SMEs and farms, protecting 1,521 jobs. This shows that there is a strong prospect of success for SMEs going to the Credit Review Office and I would strongly encourage SMEs refused credit to seek a review by the Office.

The Government has taken a number of actions to improve the situation in relation to credit availability to SMEs.

The range of credit options available to SMEs now include the Microenterprise Loan scheme which can facilitate up to €40million in additional lending to microenterprises over the next five years. In addition, the Credit Guarantee Scheme is designed for SMEs who, because of lack of collateral or because of the specialised sector they operate in, face difficulties in accessing bank credit.

It is vital that the banks continue to make credit available to support economic recovery. However, it is not in the interest of the banks, businesses or the economy for finance to be provided unless the business is viable and has the capacity to meet the interest payments and repay the sum borrowed.

More generally, small businesses can benefit from support, guidance and advice provided at local level through the network of County Enterprise Boards which are currently being transformed into Local Enterprise Offices with closer links to businesses in their local area.

Property Taxation Assessments

64. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Finance if a person, who is liable for the local property tax and has had difficult health circumstances, and in error, accepted the valuation proffered by the Revenue Commissioners initially in relation to the property, and paid same for 2013 and whereby the said valuation is way in excess and notwithstanding the opportunity for self-assessment was not availed of, due to the particular health circumstances where a person had adverse health difficulties if same will now be reviewed by way of a professional valuation and accepted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47424/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The Finance (Local Property Tax) Act 2012 (as amended) sets out how the tax is to be administered and how a residential property is to be valued for Local Property Tax (LPT) purposes. As I informed the House, most recently in my reply to Question [47040/13] on 5 November 2013, Local Property Tax (LPT) is a self-assessed tax so it is a matter for the property owner to calculate the tax due based on his or her assessment of the market value of the property as at 1 May 2013.

I also informed the House that the Revenue Commissioners had confirmed to me that if a liable person had genuinely overpaid the tax through an error or mistake, then the person should write to LPT Branch, Government Buildings, Ennis, Co Clare, clearly setting out fully the circumstances in which the overpayment arose and providing the relevant supporting documentation. Evidence could be in the form of recent sales or advertised house prices in the area, professional valuations or house price surveys for the area.

I am further advised by the Commissioners that once the relevant documentation is received LPT Branch will make direct contact with the person. Should it transpire that the person did in fact overpay the 2013 liability then it will be possible to offset some or all of the overpayment to the 2014 liability, or to make a repayment.

Property Taxation Administration

65. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Finance the reason a person (details supplied) in County Westmeath who furnished instructions to the Revenue Commissioners to deduct the property tax on a weekly basis from her State pension and who notwithstanding the aforesaid instruction, which was furnished within the appropriate time period, has now received correspondence from the Revenue Commissioners indicating that payment of the local property tax has not been in line with the payment commitment made notwithstanding that she provided instructions that same was to be deducted from her State pension; if this matter will be rectified, particularly in view of the health circumstances of this person; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47433/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am informed by Revenue that the difficulty in relation to the Local Property Tax (LPT) payment preference in this case arose in the first instance due to the person in question selecting two different payment options. When filing her LPT Return on 15 May 2013, the person selected both “deduction at source” from her Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine pension and payment through a service provider. It is acknowledged that the ‘duplicate’ payment options should have been identified during the validation process that uploads the taxpayer data to the Property Register, and referred to an operator for manual correction. Unfortunately this did not happen in this case, which resulted in the LPT Register failing to capture the preferred payment option. As a result the instruction to commence deduction at source was not activated. This processing error also

resulted in a reminder letter issuing to the person in question indicating that no payment option had been selected.

Revenue has confirmed to me that LPT Branch has written to the person in question outlining the cost implications of commencing deduction at source at this point of the year. The letter includes a direct line phone number that the person can use to contact a member of the LPT team to discuss the issue further. On receipt of confirmation from the person that she is happy to progress with deduction at source, that payment option will be implemented.

Finally, while any processing error is unfortunate, Revenue has assured me that the vast majority of returns and payments received in regard to approximately 1.59 million properties have been accurately recorded on the Property Register and that the error rate is very small in the overall context of the scale of the 2013 LPT programme.

Property Taxation Administration

66. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance the position regarding the payment of property tax in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47475/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that LPT provides for a range of payment options and property owners can choose the one that best suits their particular circumstances. I am advised that no matter how the LPT charge for 2013 was paid, property owners can choose any of the available options to pay their 2014 liability and can decide whether to pay the tax in full or to spread payments over the course of 2014.

Property owners can:

- Spread their payments evenly throughout 2014 by way of direct debit or deduction from salary, pension or Government payment (direct debits commence on 15 January 2014);
- Spread their payments by making regular payments, weekly or monthly, throughout 2014 at service providers listed (An Post, Payzone and Omnivend);
- Pay in full by Single Debit Authority (like a cheque) which will be debited by Revenue on 21 March 2014.

There is no requirement on any property owner to pay their LPT for 2014 before 1 January 2014. The only action a property owner is required to take now is to decide on their payment method for 2014 and submit the payment instruction to Revenue by the relevant due date (which is 7 November 2013 for paper filers, or 27 November 2013 for on-line filers) and this is clearly stated in the letters recently issued by the Commissioners.

There are also options to fully or partially defer the payment of the tax and full details are available at www.Revenue.ie.

In this specific case mentioned by the Deputy, I am informed by Revenue that the person submitted the LPT1 Return clearly indicating Band 2 (valuation €100,001 - €150,000) as the appropriate valuation band for his property and €112 as the liability and he made a payment for that amount in respect of 2013. There is no record of any further correspondence from this person in relation to the valuation submitted. A letter was issued by Revenue on 18 October 2013, detailing a liability of €225 for 2014, based on the Band 2 valuation for the full year, and

requesting a payment method in respect of this amount.

Finally, I am also advised by Revenue that if the person has overpaid his Local Property Tax (LPT) through an error or mistake, he should write to LPT Branch, PO Box 100, Ennis, Co Clare clearly setting out how the overpayment arose and providing supporting documentation to explain the need to decrease the value of the property in question. Supporting documentation includes professional valuations or house price surveys for the area or details on recent sales or advertised house prices in the area.

Once the relevant documentation is received, LPT Branch will make direct contact with the person. If the 2013 liability is found to have been overpaid it will be possible to allocate the excess against the 2014 liability or to make a repayment of the overpaid tax.

Mortgage Arrears Rate

67. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance in relation to the mortgage restructures data for principal dwelling houses published by his Department on 31 October 2013, if he will clarify if the permanent restructuring for mortgage in arrears over 90 days represents performing actual restructures or includes offers of restructures and restructures that have fallen in arrears; and if he will provide a breakdown of the number that are not performing and the number that are offers. [47484/13]

68. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance in relation to the mortgage restructures data for principal dwelling houses published by his Department on 31 October 2013, if he will provide a breakdown by financial institution under MART of the numbers in arrears and numbers of restructures, offered and implemented. [47485/13]

69. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance in relation to the mortgage restructures data for principal dwelling houses published by his Department on 31 October, whether he will provide an analysis for each financial institution under MART of the percentage of their arrears that have been permanently concluded and the type of arrangement using the Central Bank's quarter one figures as a base; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47486/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 67 to 69, inclusive, together.

My Department has requested the six main banks operating in Ireland, and who fall within the Central Bank Mortgage Arrears Resolution Targets (MART) process, to provide data on the restructuring situation in relation to all primary dwelling mortgages, both in arrears and not in arrears, on a monthly basis. This process is separate from the Central Bank quarterly data collection and publication process and is intended to provide certain data on the level of mortgage restructures on a more timely basis. It should be noted that these are voluntary and unaudited returns by the relevant banks, and have not gone through the lenders quality control process for regulatory return purposes. However, it is considered to be a desirable development to place more timely and frequent mortgage restructuring data into the public domain.

The data as published is the aggregate position of all the MART institutions and it would not be appropriate for my Department to publish institution specific data. The aggregate mortgage data currently available for publication in this data series includes:

- the number of primary dwelling mortgage accounts

- the number of such accounts in arrears
- the number of such accounts in arrears of greater than 90 days
- the total number of accounts that have been subject to a permanent or temporary restructure
- the number of accounts in arrears of greater than 90 days that have been subject to a permanent or temporary restructure
- information on the type of permanent or temporary restructures that have been put in place.

As the Deputy will be aware, the level and scale of action and reporting required from the banks under the MART and other regulatory requirements is increasing, and in that context, my Department will keep under review the type of data that can be collected and published in a timely manner as part of this new monthly data series. For example, while my Department's mortgage data series does not give an indication of the numbers meeting the terms of the restructures put in place, it is noted that the Central Bank MART process has set targets in this area to apply from 2014.

Fuel Rebate Scheme

70. **Deputy Patrick Nulty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider ceasing the green diesel system and replacing it with a system of tax rebates for agricultural and industrial use purposes to save the taxpayer the €600 million spent each year dyeing 1.25 billion litres of fuel and to make further savings of €150 million due to criminal resale of the fuel for other purposes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47490/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that the suggestion that huge savings could be made by moving from the current system of marking rebated fuels to one based on making repayments to those users that currently use rebated fuels is based on the erroneous view that adding the prescribed markers to rebated fuel is exceptionally costly and is borne by the exchequer. This is not the case; the cost of the markers is negligible and is borne by the industry. The cost to the exchequer of marked fuel is the tax foregone and an alternative system based on direct repayments to users would not produce any savings for the exchequer and might be more costly if the incidence of fraud were greater. There have been a number of calls for the replacement of the current marking scheme with a repayment scheme. However, a change of this nature would impact on a wide range of users, would be costly to implement and would, itself, be at risk from fraud. Marked gas oil has a variety of uses including the propulsion of trains, the operation of agricultural, construction and industrial machinery, commercial sea-navigation (including fishing) and commercial and home heating purposes. A change to a rebate system for all users would involve the establishment of an expensive and wide-ranging repayments system and place a new administrative burden on oil traders, users and the Revenue Commissioners. It would also impose significant cash-flow costs on those currently using marked gas oil.

Also, repayment schemes are vulnerable to abuse and the introduction of a wide-ranging repayment scheme such as that proposed would not necessarily offer greater security against fraud than the current arrangements. If the fuel for off-road use was not marked under the new system then it could be diverted easily to road use; if it were marked it could be laundered as at present. It would also be the case that marked fuel from Northern Ireland would continue to be available and could be laundered by fuel criminals based in border areas.

The system of marking rebated fuel has been an effective and efficient means of delivering a tax rebate on a product used by a very large number of users across a wide range of uses. Fuel laundering to remove the marker has been a persistent problem over the years. However, it remained a marginal activity because the sulphur content of marked fuel was higher than that for road fuel and therefore the sulphur content continued to distinguish laundered fuel from genuine road fuel. Environmental standards in relation to the sulphur content of fuel changed from the beginning of 2011, which resulted in marked fuel with the same sulphur content as road fuel coming onto the market. With this change, fuel laundering became more viable and criminal gangs intensified their laundering and distribution activities dramatically from the first half of 2011.

In terms of the cost to the exchequer of fuel laundering, I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that estimating the extent of any illegal activity and the associated cost to the exchequer is inherently problematic. While there is no reliable estimate of the scale of the fuel laundering problem and the consequential loss to the exchequer, they recognise that it represents a significant threat to the exchequer and to the legitimate trade.

In response, Revenue has made action against fuel laundering one of its priorities and is implementing a comprehensive strategy to tackle the problem through enhanced supply chain controls, the acquisition of a more effective fuel marker and continued robust enforcement action.

This strategy included strengthening the licensing conditions for auto-fuel traders in 2011 and the introduction of a new licensing system for marked fuel traders in October 2012. In addition, since January 2013, all licensed fuel traders are required to make electronic returns to Revenue of their fuel transactions each month. These supply chain control measures are designed to make it difficult for fuel criminals to source marked fuel for laundering and to get laundered product onto the market. Analysis of the monthly returns of fuel trading is enabling Revenue to identify suspicious or anomalous fuel transactions and patterns of distribution. Traders found to be involved in suspicious activity are investigated and if they are unable to account properly for the source or disposal of product will face revocation of their license, tax assessment and prosecution, where appropriate. There is evidence that these measures are having an impact on the ability of fuel launderers to source marked diesel for laundering and to supply the laundered fuel to legitimate outlets.

Revenue, in co-operation with other law enforcement agencies on both sides of the border, continues to intensify enforcement action against fuel fraud and this work has yielded significant results to date. In the past two years 107 filling stations throughout the State were closed for breaches of licensing conditions. In the period since 2011, over 2.9 million litres of fuel have been seized and 28 oil laundries detected and closed down, including 7 oil laundries in 2013 to date.

In addition, Revenue and HM Revenue & Customs in the UK are collaborating on identifying a more effective marker for use in both jurisdictions. A number of proposals for a new marker were received in response to an Invitation to Make Submissions and I understand that this process will be finalised shortly.

Revenue regularly reminds motorists and the public generally that, in addition to its impact on the exchequer and legitimate trade, they should be aware of the risks posed to their vehicles by using laundered fuel and the fact that sourcing fuel in this way is funding criminal activity.

The legitimate retail trade can also contribute to closing down this illegitimate trade by providing information on the outlets that are selling laundered diesel. Revenue chairs the Hidden Economy Monitoring Group (HEMG) and has established Regional sub-groups of the HEMG

to facilitate the reporting of information by traders through their representative associations. Retailers who suspect or have evidence that laundered diesel is being sold in their area should report this through their representative associations to the Revenue. Such reports are treated as confidential and are fully investigated by Revenue.

I strongly support the current strategy being implemented by Revenue and am confident that it will succeed with the co-operation and support of the legitimate trade. I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the industry has worked very closely with them in developing and implementing their strategy.

Tax Reliefs Abolition

71. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if he will re-examine the unfair tax changes for lone parents (details supplied). [47511/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): As the Deputy is aware, the One-Parent Family Tax Credit (OPFTC) is being replaced with a new Single Person Child Carer Tax Credit from 1 January 2014. The Single Person Child Carer Tax Credit will be of the same value, i.e. €1,650, as the existing OPFTC and will also carry the same entitlement to the extended standard rate tax band of €36,800 per annum. The new credit will be targeted such that it is available only to the primary carer of the child. A maximum of one credit will be available per single carer/claimant, regardless of whether he or she cares for more than one child. This is the same condition that applies to the current OPFTC. Given the difficult fiscal environment it is essential to review all tax reliefs, credits and incentives in order to ensure that they are properly targeted and if necessary re-focused in order that they can achieve the socio-economic objectives that are set for them. A system that allows multiple claims in respect of the same child, as can happen with the OPFTC, is unsustainable.

The Commission on Taxation acknowledged that the One-Parent Family Tax Credit plays a role in supporting and incentivising the labour market participation of single and widowed parents. However, in its recommendations it concluded that the credit should be retained but that it should be allocated to the principal carer only. The restructuring of the credit will achieve such an outcome.

Allocation of childcare responsibilities is primarily for parents to agree. However, having listened carefully to the views expressed by colleagues and Deputies, I have asked my officials to explore how the credit could be used by another individual, where the primary carer chooses not to, or cannot, claim it and accordingly I will be bringing forward an amendment at Committee Stage.

Pensions Levy

72. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if he will re-examine the financial implications for pensioners of the pension levy. [47515/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I announced in my recent Budget speech that the 0.6% Pension Fund Levy introduced to fund the Jobs Initiative in 2011 will be abolished from the 31st of December 2014. I will however, introduce an additional levy on pension funds at 0.15%. I am doing this to continue to help fund the Jobs Initiative, including the continuation of the reduced 9% VAT rate detailed below and to make provision for potential State liabilities which may emerge from pre-existing or future pension fund difficulties. The additional levy

within the existing legal framework will apply to pension fund assets in 2014 and 2015. The pension fund levy imposes an annual stamp duty on the market value of assets under management in pension schemes approved by the Revenue Commissioners under Irish tax legislation.

The chargeable persons for the levy are the trustees or other persons (including insurance companies) with responsibility for the management of the assets of the pension schemes or plans. The payment of the levy is treated as a necessary expense of a pension scheme and the trustees or insurer, as appropriate, are entitled, where they decide to do so, to adjust current or prospective benefits payable under a scheme to take account of the levy. It is up to the trustees to decide whether and how the levy should be passed on and who should be impacted and to what extent, given the particular circumstances of the pension schemes for which they are responsible.

Individuals may be affected in different ways by the pension fund levy. I am not in a position to comment on what the precise impact of the levy will be in all cases on individuals or individual funds, schemes, members or retired members as this depends, for example, on whether and to what extent pension fund trustees and Life Offices decide to pass on the levy to individual members, given the particular circumstances of the pension funds or pension plans that they are responsible for.

However, should the option of reducing scheme benefits be taken, in no case may the reduction in an individual member's or class of member's benefits exceed the member's or class of member's share of the levy.

Tax Rebates

73. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if the home renovation incentive scheme applies in circumstances (details supplied). [47520/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): As the Deputy is aware, I announced the Home Renovation Incentive in the recent Budget. This scheme will run from 25 October 2013 to 31 December 2015 and provides for tax relief for homeowners by way of a tax credit at 13.5% of qualifying expenditure incurred on repair, renovation or improvement work carried out on a principal private residence. The legislation states that a qualifying residence is a residential premises situated in the state and which is either owned by the individual and occupied as their only or main residence, or has previously been occupied as a residence and has been purchased by the individual for occupation as their only or main residence once works have been completed.

As the property in question is not currently the principal private residence of the individuals concerned or has previously been occupied as a residence, it will not qualify for the Home Renovation Incentive.

Mortgage Arrears Rate

74. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance if he will outline by mortgage lender the number of the 142,000 home owners in mortgage arrears who have completed the MARPs process; of the remaining cases in arrears, the exact number, by lender, of borrowers at each of the five steps in the MARP process; the number of home owners in arrears, by lender, who had to appeal the initial decision of the MARP process to reach a satisfactory arrangement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47541/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The Central Bank's Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears (CCMA) provides that each bank must put in place a formal Mortgage Arrears Resolution Process to deal with its mortgage customers who are in arrears or pre-arrears and for the establishment of dedicated arrears support units and appeals processes to handle such cases. Section 55 of the CCMA provides that complaints relating to the lender's treatment of the borrower's case under the MARP process and the lender's compliance with the requirements of the CCMA must be dealt with in accordance with the complaints provisions set out in the Consumer Protection Code 2012. This provides a detailed complaints resolution framework which seeks, in the first instance, to resolve matters directly between the consumer and financial institution but, failing that, the matter can be referred to the independent Financial Services Ombudsman.

The Central Bank of Ireland has informed me that it does not track the number of borrowers covered under the MARP but does track the number of mortgage accounts in arrears and the number of alternative arrangements put in place across the regulated industry and which are published quarterly by the Central Bank. This is available on the Central Bank's website, <http://www.centralbank.ie>. The latest Central Bank quarterly publication on mortgage arrears, restructures and reposessions reports that at the end of June 2013 there are 142,892 PDH mortgage accounts in arrears. 79,357 mortgages are in a restructure arrangement, 42,309 of these are not in arrears as at end June 2013. Therefore of accounts in arrears 37,048 are in a restructure. The Central Bank of Ireland has advised me that it does not however release institution specific data.

The Central Bank has also informed me that it is monitoring the banks' performance against the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Targets (MART), and a series of supervisory audits are planned to consider the completeness, accuracy and validity of the outcomes reported by the specified credit institutions.

Property Taxation Assessments

75. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for Finance if the Revenue Commissioners will confirm the position concerning liability for local property tax in respect of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 4; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47546/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised by Revenue that Section 11 of the Finance (Local Property Tax) Act 2012 (as amended) provides that lessees who hold long-term leases of residential property spanning twenty years or more, are liable to pay Local Property Tax (LPT) in respect of that property. In the specific case mentioned by the Deputy, I am advised that the person concerned is not considered to be the liable person for LPT purposes because, although he is the owner of the property, he has let it for a period of more than twenty years, and therefore the lessee is the liable person.

I am advised that Revenue amended the Property Register to reflect the lessee as the liable person. However, the difficulties experienced by the person arose because, due to an operational oversight, Revenue failed to inform the person that he was not liable to pay any LPT and as a consequence he paid the LPT in respect of the property.

I understand that Revenue has issued a response to the person in question, advising him that he is not liable for LPT and that a full refund of the LPT paid will issue to him within five working days.

Finally, Revenue apologises for the communications oversight and assures the Deputy that

the vast majority of cases requiring amendments of this nature are immediately notified to the relevant people.

Tax Collection

76. **Deputy Michael McCarthy** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to concerns relating to the possibility that the date of the pay and file income tax return deadline will be brought forward; the effect of such a change on cash flows for income tax payers and small and medium-sized businesses; the challenges for the professionals who complete and file tax returns on their behalf, for seasonal operations, particularly agricultural and tourist related operators; his views on the impact of this proposal on the current excellent level of compliance and the need to ensure that taxpayers, business groups, tax advisers and accountants are consulted on any proposed changes. [47559/13]

87. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether the proposed June option would be unworkable for taxpayers and for the profession, that is, for all practices whether small, medium or large; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47627/13]

89. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the pay and file consultation period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47634/13]

90. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the pay and file consultation period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47635/13]

91. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the pay and file consultation period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47636/13]

92. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the pay and file consultation period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47637/13]

93. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the pay and file consultation period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47638/13]

94. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the pay and file consultation period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47639/13]

95. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the pay and file consultation period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47640/13]

96. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the pay and file consultation period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47641/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 76, 87 and 89 to 96, inclusive, together.

Under the regulations known as the “Two-Pack” which were formally adopted on 30th May 2013, a common budgetary timeline is being introduced for all Euro Area member states. Specifically:

- the draft budget for central government and the main parameters of the draft budgets for all the other sub-sectors of the general government must be published by 15th October each year;
- draft budgetary plans in a common format must be submitted by all Euro area Member States not in a programme of assistance; and
- the budget for the central government must be adopted or fixed upon and published by 31st December each year.

In light of these requirements, the Government decided to bring Budget Day forward from the first week in December to on or before 15th October from now on. Accordingly, I presented Budget 2014 on Tuesday last, 15th October. The Government also decided that the Finance Bill should complete its passage through the Oireachtas by 31st December each year. One of the most critical elements of the Budget process is the accuracy of systems for forecasting potential revenue yield in the year in question prior to the Budget actually taking place.

In the context of a December Budget Day, the availability prior to the Budget of information on cumulative tax yields to the end of November gave a high degree of certainty to the estimation of potential outturn for the year. For example, cumulative tax yield to the end of November 2012 was €33.8bn, which represented 92% of the full year outturn of €36.6bn. On the other hand, cumulative yield to end September, at €26.1bn, represented only 71.3% of the eventual outturn.

The scope for unanticipated events which would lead to either a higher or lower than projected outturn is considerably increased in the context of an October Budget. In addition the ability to project future yield is compromised. Consequently, measures which would result in improvements in the availability of information or increases in the proportion of total yield already available prior to the Budget have to be considered. The main areas where scope exists to introduce such improvements relate to the income tax Pay & File arrangements and on 11th October I initiated a consultation process on a revision of the existing arrangements.

I am aware of the concerns that have been raised and will consider the results of this consultation process, which closes on Friday next, 8th November, when drafting, as a Committee Stage amendment to the forthcoming Finance Bill, the necessary measures. I would reiterate that changes to the Pay and File regime are necessary as a result of the move to an earlier Budget Day, following the adoption of the Two-Pack and will provide increased certainty around the annual tax take. I would encourage all those who hold views on the proposed changes to engage with my Department via the consultation process. Full details are available on our tax policy website, www.taxpolicy.gov.ie.

Property Taxation Collection

77. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Finance the reason a person (details supplied) in County Cork had local property tax deducted from their wages when they were exempt from LPT; the measures being put in place to rectify this error; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47573/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised by Revenue that, in the case to which the Deputy refers, the deduction from wages was not in respect of the person's

primary residence which is exempt from Local Property Tax (LPT). The person in question was linked to a second property on the basis of records imported by Revenue from another Government agency database during the development of the Property Register. It is now evident that the person was registered with this agency to pay certain charges in relation to the second property but was not in fact the owner. It has since been confirmed that the property belongs to the person's parents and was duplicated on the Property Register.

I am further advised that the LPT Return which issued in March 2013 indicated to the person that he was a multiple property owner. Revenue received no contact from the person disputing the accuracy of his records and a compliance letter subsequently issued on 29 July 2013 in respect of the second property. The letter clearly requested that if he was not the liable owner that he immediately notify Revenue. The letter also advised that "deduction at source" would commence in the absence of a response. Revenue received no response from the person until 20 September 2013 when he telephoned to confirm that he did not own the property and that his parents were the liable persons. Unfortunately an instruction to deduct LPT from his salary had already issued to his employer.

On foot of the person's telephone contact, Revenue amended the Property Register and issued a revised instruction to his employer to cease deductions. The employer subsequently confirmed that deductions had ceased from 1 October. A refund of €50.50 is due to the person and I am assured that it will issue to him in the coming days.

Finally, Revenue has acknowledged that the linkage of the second property to the person in question during the development of the Property Register was an error. However Revenue did communicate strongly during the initial stages of LPT that errors in the compilation of the Property Register were inevitable given the scale of the task. Revenue also clearly requested anybody who received incorrect information in regard to their properties to contact the LPT Helpline immediately to avoid unnecessary compliance interventions. Unfortunately in this instance the person delayed making contact and as a consequence compliance activity commenced.

Property Taxation Administration

78. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Finance the procedures employed by the Revenue Commissioners for repaying persons who have had the incorrect amount of local property tax directly deducted from their income; when such repayments will be made; if the required reimbursement will take the form of an amended personal tax credit or if it will be a direct repayment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47606/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised by Revenue that Local Property Tax (LPT) refunds are not reimbursed in the form of amended income tax credits. Revenue has confirmed to me that LPT refunds are either made directly to the property owner or set against other outstanding tax liabilities, including LPT, if appropriate. Revenue has also confirmed that in the case of overpayments arising from the 'deduction at source' payment option, liable persons should not request their employers or pension providers to make LPT refunds directly to them but should instead submit claims directly to Revenue.

By way of general comment, Section 26 of the 2012 Finance (Local Property Tax) Act (as amended) provides for a refund of LPT where a person has, in respect of a liability date, paid more than what was correctly due in error. A refund may be issued where a claim for repayment is submitted to Revenue within four years after the end of the year to which the claim relates.

In order to receive a refund a person must submit a claim in writing to Revenue. The basis for the claim should be explained in the submission and the relevant supporting documentation should be included. The supporting documentation must provide all of the information that Revenue may reasonably require to enable it determine if and to what extent a refund of LPT exists. All LPT refund claims should either be emailed to LPT@revenue.ie or posted to PO Box 1, Ennis, Co. Clare. The Act also provides that any person who is unhappy with a determination by Revenue in regard to a refund, may appeal that decision to the appeal Commissioners.

Tax Reliefs Eligibility

79. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the number of taxpayers that will be impacted in 2014 by restriction on tax relief on contributions to large pension pots outlined in budget 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47611/13]

82. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the way he will ensure that the restriction on tax relief on contributions to large pension pots will apply equally to workers in the public and private sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47614/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 79 and 82 together.

It is difficult to be definitive about the number of individuals that may be affected by the changes to the Standard Fund Threshold (SFT) regime. Among other reasons, this is because the changes are likely to have both direct impacts and indirect behavioural impacts. The direct impacts will be on individuals whose pension savings or entitlements will be in excess of the reduced SFT on 1 January 2014 (and who may seek a Personal Fund Threshold (PFT)) and those whose pension savings or entitlements may be below the threshold on that date but, with future contributions or accruals, may exceed the threshold in time. For both of these groups where the SFT or PFT is exceeded at the point of retirement, chargeable excess tax will arise. However, the changes are also likely to mean that individuals (generally in the private sector) who may otherwise be affected by the amendments to the SFT, and who have the flexibility to do so, may change behaviour and opt out of additional pension saving or pension accrual, in circumstances where they can obtain compensatory payments from their employer, in order to avoid breaching the SFT or their PFT. Overall, the changes could potentially impact, both directly and indirectly, on up to 10,000 individuals in the short to medium term.

The changes to the SFT regime apply, as appropriate, to both defined benefit (DB) and defined contribution (DC) pension arrangements in both the private and public sectors. As regards DB pension arrangements, it is irrelevant whether an individual is a higher paid civil servant, a Minister or a highly paid member of a private sector DB scheme, the same SFT rules apply to all such arrangements.

Property Taxation Collection

80. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the provision that will be made for persons wishing to pay the local property tax by means of deduction from their current account for customers of the two banks who recently indicated their intention to cease offering retail banking services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47612/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised by Revenue that primary responsibility for providing valid bank account details in regard to any tax payment, including

Local Property Tax (LPT), rests with the taxpayer. However, notwithstanding the above, Revenue has confirmed to me that when the banks in question confirm the timing of the service withdrawal, it will review all remaining debit instructions at that point, including LPT. Once the affected cases are identified, Revenue will endeavour to make direct contact with the relevant people to request alternative bank account details or to advise on alternative payment options.

Tax Yield

81. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide a breakdown of the tax yield from his plan to restrict tax relief on private medical insurance policies by income band; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47613/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): An upper ceiling on the amount of medical insurance premiums that will qualify for tax relief, of €1,000 per adult and €500 per child was introduced in the Budget. The yield from this measure is estimated at €94 million in 2014 and €127 million in a full year. The position is that income tax relief is generally provided on contributions to private health insurance by way of the Tax Relief at Source system (TRS) at 20%, regardless of whether the individual has an income tax liability or not. Therefore, information on the income of insured individuals is not necessary for the administration of the granting of tax relief at source. I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that a breakdown of the impact of the Budget measure by range of income could not be compiled without requiring the health insurers to provide income-based information in their annual returns, followed by carrying out a significant development of the Revenue Commissioners' TRS computer system.

Question No. 82 answered with Question No. 79.

Tax Reliefs Application

83. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the number of taxpayers who will be affected by standard rating of pension tax relief; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47615/13]

84. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the tax yield that would be achieved by standard rating pension tax relief by income band; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47616/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 83 and 84 together.

A breakdown of the cost of tax relief on employee contributions to occupational pension schemes is not available by either income tax rate or by reference to income levels, as tax returns by employers to the Revenue Commissioners of employee contributions to such schemes are aggregated at employer level. There is, therefore, no statistical basis for providing definitive figures. However, by making certain assumptions about the available information, it is estimated that the full-year yield to the Exchequer from confining tax relief to the standard rate of 20% in respect of pension contributions to occupational pension schemes, retirement annuity contracts and personal retirement savings accounts and confining tax relief for the Public Service pension related deduction to the standard rate of 20% would be in the region of €480 million. This estimate includes €90 million in respect of the Public Service pension related deduction.

This estimate does not allow for possible behavioural changes that could arise from a change in the rate of relief. I should note that, as indicated in my Budget 2014 speech, contributions to pension savings will continue to attract income tax relief at the marginal rate.

In terms of the 2010 income tax year, the latest year for which the necessary figures are available, it is estimated that about 760,000 claimants avail of income tax relief on contributions to occupational pension schemes, retirement annuity contracts and personal retirement savings accounts. Due to the lack of distributional data by either tax rate or by income levels as mentioned earlier it is not possible to provide reliable details of the impact of standard rating by reference to the numbers affected or by reference to income bands.

Company Law

85. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Finance the reason he has not made the legislative changes requested by the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement relating to the negative impact on its ability to tackle white collar crime as a result of the insertion of section 851A of the Taxes Consolidation Act into section 77 of the Finance Act 2011, which has restricted to ability of the ODCE to obtain, and where obtained, use certain information from the Revenue Commissioners. [47618/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): My colleague the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation received Government approval on Tuesday 5 November to publish the Companies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2013. This Bill contains a proposed amendment to the Company Law Enforcement Act 2001 which is the legislation governing the ODCE. The relevant amendment addresses the sharing of information with the ODCE by the Revenue Commissioners and other bodies and is intended to resolve the difficulties encountered by the ODCE that arose as a result of the insertion of section 851A into the Finance Act 2011.

Consumer Protection

86. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to regulate or outlaw the practice of money lending. [47619/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I have no plans to introduce legislation to prohibit moneylenders from carrying on legitimate business. Moneylenders are governed by a number of legislative obligations and supervisory requirements. Moneylenders are required to hold a licence in accordance with the provisions of the Consumer Credit Act 1995 as amended. This licence is issued by the Central Bank and must be renewed annually. Moneylenders must also comply with the requirements of Statutory Instrument 281 of 2010 on the European Communities (Consumer Credit Agreements) Regulations 2010, and the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code for Licenced Moneylenders.

The Code sets out general principles with which a moneylender must comply. It also places requirements on moneylenders in relation to the provision of information to the consumer, preservation of a consumer's rights, unsolicited contact (cold calling), disclosure, errors, handling complaints, consumer records, unsolicited credit facilities, arrears and guarantees, debt collection and the contents and presentation of advertisements.

The Central Bank also monitors compliance with legislative and supervisory requirements by way of reviews, advertising monitoring, consumer intelligence and themed inspections.

Under Common Rule 3b of the Code, prior to entering into an agreement with a consumer, a moneylender must indicate prominently the high-cost nature of the loan on all loan documentation where the APR is 23% or higher. The disclosure must take the following form “**Warning: this is a high-cost loan**”. The Code also places some requirements on moneylenders in relation to advertising. A copy of the Code is available on the Central Bank’s website www.centralbank.ie.

Furthermore, the annual percentage rate allowable under moneylending licences is publicly stated on the public register for moneylenders. This register is available on the Central Bank’s website.

While it should be noted that moneylender loans can be more expensive than other forms of credit, many of these loans are unique in nature. For example, they may be small value loans, over a short term and repayments may be collected at the consumer’s home.

The activities of illegal moneylenders are a matter for An Garda Síochána.

I would like to inform the Deputy that the Central Bank will tomorrow publish a “Report on the Licensed Moneylending Industry”. The report will be available on the Central Bank’s website.

Question No. 87 answered with Question No. 76.

Property Taxation Collection

88. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance the person responsible for making the decision that the Revenue Commissioners have told almost 1 million home owners to pay their property tax bill for 2014 by 27 November 2013 if they are paying by credit card, debit card or cheque; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47629/13]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I note that similar questions concerning payment of the 2014 Local Property Tax (LPT) liability by credit card, debit card or cheque have been raised by a number of Deputies, including yourself, and I provided a detailed response and statement on this issue in my reply to Questions No. 143, 202, 214 to 216, inclusive, 229, 232, 239 and 259 [46491/13, 46815/13, 46879/13, 46881/13, 46999/13, 47059/13, 47101/13, 47110/13, and 47136/13] on 5 November 2013.

The filing date for LPT for 2014 provided for in the Finance (Local Property Tax) Act 2013, as amended, is 7 November. However, the Deputy may be aware that the Revenue Commissioners have extended today’s filing date for paper returns by one week to 14 November 2013.

I re-iterate that there is no requirement on any property owner to pay their LPT for 2014 before 1 January 2014 and, as I have informed the House previously, Revenue has provided a range of LPT payment options and property owners can choose the one that best suits their particular circumstances.

Questions Nos. 89 to 96, inclusive, answered with Question No. 76.

Employment Support Services

97. **Deputy Brian Walsh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he proposes to expand the MOMENTUM training initiative in order to facilitate accessibility of additional

courses specific to the availability of employment and thereby allowing many persons to re-train for employment specific to the local employment market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47500/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Ciarán Cannon):

The aim of MOMENTUM is to provide a range of quality, relevant education & training interventions in 2013 for up to 6,500 individuals who are long-term unemployed. Training is being provided within the context of four themes. Three of the themes support occupational clusters where demand and vacancies exist within certain Labour Market sectors. A fourth theme focuses on the specific needs of people under 25. A design feature of Momentum provides for continuous evaluation of the programme so we can ensure that the training provided is effective, efficient and value for money. I expect to have the outcome of evaluations in respect of the procurement and provision of the programme by year end. Recommendations from this evaluation process will be incorporated into the new programme and I would expect that a new round of Momentum will be announced in early 2014. Ongoing evaluation of the outcomes of the programme in respect of progression into employment will also inform future iterations of the programme. My Department will continue to work closely with all relevant Government Departments and Agencies to ensure that the Government is putting the right measures in place to ensure people can upskill and reskill in the areas where skills are in demand. In this context a new purpose built clean room training facility adjacent to the current SOLAS Training Centre in Galway has been developed and it is planned that this centre will train individuals for work in the medical devices cluster in Galway.

Employment Support Services

98. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on correspondence (details supplied) regarding the online Springboard application gateway. [47622/13]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The Springboard programme strategically targets funding of free part-time flexible higher education courses for unemployed and previously self-employed people in areas where there are identified labour market skills shortages or employment opportunities. Courses are selected for funding following a competitive tender process that is open to public, private and not for profit higher education providers.

To be eligible for a place on a Springboard course a person must be unemployed, actively seeking employment, and be in receipt of one of the qualifying Department of Social Protection payments or be signing for credits or be previously self-employed. Provided an applicant meets the Springboard 2013 eligibility criteria, decisions around the award of places on an approved programme are a matter for individual course providers.

If a person does not meet the entry requirements for a particular course it is open to them to apply for another course funded through the programme. Further information is available at the dedication information and applications website www.springboardcourses.ie.

School Staffing

99. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will reconsider the decision to withdraw a teacher from a new primary school (details supplied) in County Cork in view of the fact that new pupils are expected to enrol in the school shortly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47416/13]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The criteria used for the allocation of teaching posts to schools which is available on the Department website, includes the provision whereby schools experiencing rapid increases in enrolment can apply for additional permanent mainstream posts on developing grounds, using projected enrolment. The staffing schedule also includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit an appeal under certain criteria, including developing grounds, to an independent Appeals Board. The criteria for the allocation of a developing school post for the 2013/14 school year are set out in the staffing schedule, Circular 0013/2013. The school referred to by the Deputy submitted an appeal in October to the Appeals Board for the retention of a mainstream post on developing school grounds. The decision of the board was that the post may be retained on a provisional basis and is subject to confirmation of the required enrolment being achieved by 31 December 2013. The school has been notified accordingly. The Appeal Board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final.

School Funding

100. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will provide all the various grants and approvals given for schools at primary and secondary level in County Westmeath from 1 April 2011 to date in 2013; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47432/13]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The capital allocations issued by my Department since 1 April 2011 to primary and post-primary schools in County Westmeath are as follows:

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Year	€
2011 (April-December)	€4.038m
2012	€1.542m
2013 to date	€1.700m
TOTAL April 2011 to date	€7.280m

POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Year	€
2011 (April-December)	€3.263m
2012	€4.235m
2013 to date	€1.776m
TOTAL April 2011 to date	€9.274m

Apprenticeship Programmes

101. **Deputy Kevin Humphreys** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way the new registration fee for aircraft apprentices will be charged as they spend longer in college; if this fee will be on top of the current registration fees that some institutes of technology charge; if apprentices will be able to apply for waiver of the registration fee under the maintenance grant scheme as applies for third level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47448/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Ciarán Cannon):

The Annual Student Contribution is levied on students attending Institutes of Technology. The amount due by apprentices is calculated on a pro rata basis of the time which they spend in Institutes of Technology during the academic year. Aircraft mechanic apprentices spend longer than most trades in an Institute of Technology due to the nature of their studies and their payment will be calculated accordingly. Since 2004, FÁS/SOLAS has paid a part of the Annual Student Contribution due in respect of apprentices, with apprentices themselves paying the part of the contribution relating to examination fees. As part of Budget 2014, SOLAS will cease making payments to Institutes of Technology and apprentices will pay the full pro rata Annual Student Contribution. Apprentices are paid a training allowances by SOLAS for phases of their training spent in Institutes of Technology. This allowance is equivalent to the wages they receive from their employers for on the job phases and is unaffected by the budgetary changes. The amount of the SOLAS training allowance paid aircraft mechanics while they attend IOTs ranges from €363 to €647 per week. Apprentices do not meet the funding conditions of the Student Grant Scheme as they are not participating in an approved full-time course in an approved institution.

Student Grant Scheme Delays

102. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will expedite a Student Universal Support Ireland application in respect of a person (details supplied). [47449/13]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): Officials in my Department have confirmed with Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) that in the case of the student referred to by the Deputy his application has been assessed and a letter informing him of the outcome will issue shortly.

Student Grant Scheme Appeals

103. **Deputy Damien English** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason a person (details supplied) in County Meath was refused a higher education grant on the grounds of their residency status even though they are in possession of a stamp 4 GNIB card; the reason this person was not granted a full review of their original application in view of information provided; the reason for refusal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47481/13]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): Officials in my Department have confirmed with Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) that, following an appeal to SUSI from the student referred to by the Deputy, a letter issued on 22nd October 2013 upholding the original decision of the awarding authority. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform adjudicates on a person's entitlement to remain in the State and on the stamp that is awarded where permission to remain is sanctioned. A 'stamp 4' does not of itself convey any entitlement to public services. The nationality requirements for the student grant scheme are set out in section 14 of the Student Support Act 2011 and regulation 5 of the Student Support Regulations 2013. In all cases, to qualify for a student grant, it is the grant applicant and not his/her parents that must meet the nationality or prescribed immigration status requirements in their own right. The onus is on the grant applicant to provide the necessary documentary evidence as proof of their nationality or immigration status to the relevant grant awarding authority. Where an appeal is turned down in writing by SUSI and the applicant remains of the view that the scheme has not been interpreted correctly in his or her case, an appeal form outlining the position may be submitted by the applicant to the independent Student Grants Appeals Board.

The relevant appeal form is available to download from http://www.studentfinance.ie/downloads/1375344221/2013_SGAB_appeal_form.pdf.

Schools Building Projects Status

104. **Deputy Patrick Nulty** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when construction of the extension to Castleknock Community College will commence. [47506/13]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): My Department has authorised Dublin Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board to proceed to tender on the project for Castleknock Community College. The tender specification is currently being finalised by the ETB and its design team and is expected to issue to the prequalified contractors later this month. Following completion of the tender process the start on site date will then be agreed with the successful contractor.

School Accommodation

105. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will provide necessary funding for facilities at a school (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47531/13]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The school referred to by the Deputy have been approved devolved funding to replace prefabs at their school. The school have submitted a further request for capital funding to provide additional car parking spaces on their school site. I wish to advise the Deputy that, in general, individual school authorities are responsible, in the first instance, for ensuring the safety and welfare of children and others in their care. Due to competing demands on my Department's capital budget, imposed by the need to prioritise the limited funding available for the provision of essential additional classroom accommodation to meet increasing demographic requirements, I am not in a position to give an indicative timeframe for progression of the school's request at this time.

Public Sector Staff Sick Leave

106. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the new reduced sick leave arrangements will take effect for staff in schools; the date from which they will commence to calculate this leave; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47565/13]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): Following a review of sick leave arrangements and the binding Labour Court Recommendation No. LCR20335, a new Public Service wide Sick Leave Scheme will be introduced across the public service. In recognition of the differences in the education sector, the Labour Court Recommendation stated that while the revised sick leave arrangements should be of general application to all categories of public servants the application of the new scheme should be the subject of further consultative meetings under the auspices of the Department of Education and Skills.

These consultative meetings have taken place and my Department will notify the partners and schools shortly the agreed position for the Education sector.

Schools Building Projects Status

107. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding a proposed building project for a school (details supplied) in County Cavan; when this project will proceed to the next stage; the likely timescale for construction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47566/13]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The school building project referred to by the Deputy is at an advanced stage of architectural planning. An appeal to an Bord Pleanála has recently been concluded and the Design Team are working on the completion of stage 2(b) of Architectural Planning. When the Stage 2b Report has been submitted and reviewed, my Department will contact the Board of Management with regard to the potential, at that time, for further progression of the project. It is not possible to progress all projects within the Department's building programme to construction concurrently due to competing demands on the Department's capital budget. However, school building projects, including the project referred to by the Deputy, which have not been included in the five year construction programme, but which were previously initiated will continue to be progressed to final planning stages in anticipation of the possibility of further funds being available to the Department in the future.

Residential Institutions

108. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills in relation to the fact that a number of concerns have been raised about the State funded groups which claim to represent institutional abuse victims not actually reflecting the views of survivors, if he will facilitate and attend a national meeting with the survivors of abuse in relation to the statutory fund, the idea of a memorial and the way their files will be dealt with. [47617/13]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): I am aware that there are a range of views among the survivors of institutional abuse. Some 15,000 survivors have received awards from the Residential Institutions Redress Board and some 60% of applications are from survivors living in Ireland. I have no plans to facilitate a national meeting of survivors as proposed. The legislation establishing the Residential Institutions Statutory Fund followed an extensive consultation process undertaken by my Department, which involved meetings with the religious congregations, groups representing survivors of residential institutional child abuse and a number of other interested parties. Press advertisements invited views, which could be forwarded by post, email or by a Freefone Service, which was operated by Barnardos, on behalf of my Department. A report on the consultation process is available on my Department's website. I also met with groups representing survivors of residential institutional abuse in July 2011, when we discussed the Government's approach to the proposed Statutory Fund. The Memorial Committee, established to oversee the commissioning of the Memorial, undertook a public consultation process as well as meeting with survivor groups and interested parties, before launching its competition in July 2011. The Government has agreed in principle to my bringing forward legislative proposals to allow for the retention of the records of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (CICA), the Residential Institutions Redress Board (RIRB) and the Review Committee, subject to their being sealed for possibly 75 years.

National Lottery Funding Disbursement

109. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide details of his commitment to developing a proposed convention centre in Cork; if there is a timeline envisaged for the development of this important infrastructural project; the anticipated tourism and economic benefits of this commitment; and if he will make a statement

on the matter. [47460/13]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brendan Howlin): On Budget day this year, I announced additional investment of €200m from the proceeds of the National Lottery Licence transaction. This investment will be used to progress a number of additional projects and programmes in 2014 including the project to which the Deputy refers. The precise allocation of the proceeds to the Departments concerned is being determined at present and will be published in the Revised Estimates for Public Services 2014 which will be published in December. My Department will not have any involvement in the management and/or roll-out of this or any of the other projects to be funded from the Lottery Licence transaction. That will be a matter for the relevant Minister and his/her Department.

Of course, Departments must ensure that, as with all capital projects, those to be funded through this additional investment are appraised in line with the processes set out in the Public Spending Code.

Office of Public Works Properties

110. **Deputy Patrick Nulty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 335 of 11 June 2013, if he will consider allowing local community groups to tender for use of the building referred to therein in view of the fact that the Office of Public Works has agreed to do this in the case of old Garda stations. [47504/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brian Hayes): The Office of Public Works is in the process of selling this property on the open market and has engaged estate agents to manage the sale. Any community group is welcome to bid for the property.

Child Care Services Provision

111. **Deputy Eric Byrne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 122 of 23 October 2013, if he will clarify the situation regarding the provision of crèche facilities (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47413/13]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brendan Howlin): As the Deputy will appreciate several of the specific issues raised in the details supplied for this question relate to confidential matters between an individual and a crèche and as such it would not be appropriate for me to comment or take any action potentially impinging on the contractual situation.

As set out in the previous reply on this matter, arising from the decision taken to discontinue the Civil Service Childcare Initiative following a Focused Policy Assessment in 2012, there have been detailed negotiations between OPW and the civil service crèche operators. These negotiations were complex, involving three operators, seven buildings, the Chief State Solicitor's Office and the solicitors of the operators. In light of these circumstances, I am satisfied that they were completed in an appropriately timely manner resulting in the continued operation of the crèches under a revised commercial licence. Given that the crèches will be operating under a commercial licence and there is no longer any subsidy provided by the State, the fees charged by the crèche services are strictly a commercial matter for the relevant operators, in respect of which I, as Minister for Public Expenditure, have no role.

In relation to the issue raised concerning the period of notice given to parents, as I set out in my previous reply, since agreement on the interim licence arrangement was reached with the existing operators during the summer of 2013, the Civil Service Childcare Initiative Board and OPW have been active in ensuring that operators inform parents of the new arrangements. My Department has been advised by the operator that in this specific case parents were informed on 25th June 2013 of the potential for fee changes if the crèche was successful in its negotiations with the OPW. Parents were also advised at that time that the operator would give parents two months' notice of a change to the fees. I also understand that there were further communications to parents on 5th September 2013 outlining that there would be a fee increase and that parents would be given two months' notice of these increases. The actual notification of the fee increase was issued on 10th October to the parents advising them of the new fee structure which is proposed to take effect from 1 January, 2014.

Polasaí don Ghaeilge

112. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Aire Caiteachais Phoiblí agus Athchóirithe cén bunús taighde nó sochtheangeolaíoch atá leis an gcinneadh atá glactha ag an Rialtas maidir le cumas na Gaeilge ó thaobh earcaíochta sa Státseirbhís a athrú; cén chaoi a dtacaíonn sé seo leis an Straitéis Fíche Bliain don Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. [47434/13]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brendan Howlin): In developing a new policy approach to the Irish language proficiency aspect for recruitment to the civil service my Department - working collaboratively in particular with the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht - was strongly guided by the evidence that the pre-existing approach of providing for bonus marks in all competitions for Irish language ability was clearly not achieving its objective. In particular the uptake of the scheme was low and those awarded bonus marks were not being utilised to provide services through Irish. The key imperative informing the new approach is, therefore, to put in place a coherent set of measures underpinning service delivery through Irish.

Within this overarching policy approach, Irish language proficiency policy for the civil service has been refocused to provide more meaningful and effective services through Irish. The Departments Implementation Plan for the 20 - Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-30 includes measures aimed at building capacity in the provision of Irish language services in the civil service. The workforce planning process will be revised to require Government Departments and Offices to identify posts and areas of work requiring functional bilinguals. In tandem with this panels of qualified personnel who are Irish proficient will be put in place from recruitment competitions as necessary from which the identified roles can be filled.

Please note, the Deputy will receive a reply in Irish as soon as possible.

Office of the Ombudsman Investigations

113. **Deputy Arthur Spring** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the mechanisms in place for questioning a decision of the Ombudsman; and his views on whether or not the process is transparent and accountable. [47479/13]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brendan Howlin): The Ombudsman is legally independent and there is no statutory provision for appeals against individual decisions of the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman is, however, legally obliged to report to the Houses of the Oireachtas annually on the performance of his/her functions. In addition, the

Ombudsman has a reporting relationship with the Committee on Public Service Oversight and Petitions in accordance with that Committee's terms of reference.

The Office of the Ombudsman operates an internal non-statutory appeal process which is open to any complainant who is not satisfied with the Ombudsman's decision in their case. If an appeal or request for a review is received, it is the practice of that Office to have the matter considered afresh by a caseworker who is in a more senior position and who was not previously involved in the original decision. Complainants are invited by the Office's Appeals Manager to provide further information or argument which would benefit the Office in reviewing their case. The full details of the appeals procedure are available on the Ombudsman's website at <http://www.ombudsman.gov.ie/en/About-Us/Policies-and-Strategies/Appeals-Procedure>.

Coastal Protection

114. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department has any record of involvement in a project (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47529/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brian Hayes): The management of coastal erosion in any particular area is a matter for the relevant local authority concerned in the first instance.

Our records show that in June 2006 the Office of Public Works wrote to Coiste Forbartha na Sceilge confirming that Ballinskellig Castle was not a national monument in State ownership or care and that the OPW did not have any responsibility for its maintenance. In June 2009 the then Chairman of the OPW in reply to representations from the then Ceann Comhairle, Mr John O'Donoghue, indicated that the OPW had no record of a submission from Kerry County Council in relation to the Castle and that the OPW was writing to all Councils including Kerry County Council asking them to identify their priorities in relation to coastal protection works. To date the OPW has not received an application for funding from Kerry County Council for coastal protection works at this location.

It is open to the Council to submit such an application under the OPW's Minor Works & Coastal Protection Scheme, if the Council considers it a priority to do so. Any application received will be assessed under the eligibility criteria for coastal protection measures, including a requirement that any measures are cost beneficial, and having regard to the overall availability of funding. Application forms and related guidelines are available on the OPW website under Flood Risk Management.

National Monuments

115. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will consider taking charge of a site (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47534/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brian Hayes): Staigue Fort is not in State ownership. It is in State guardianship and is therefore afforded legal protection in terms of its conservation and preservation in accordance with the National Monuments Acts, 1930 -1994. The land and approaches to the monument neither fall under the ownership nor the maintenance remit of the Office of Public Works.

Commercial Rates Impact

116. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the action being taken to assist small and medium enterprises that are forced to pay high commercial rates each year, which is costing jobs. [47517/13]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): The levying and collection of commercial rates is a reserved function of the Local Authorities which come under the policy remit of the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Mr. Phil Hogan, T.D. The Annual Rate of Valuation (ARV) is decided by the elected members of each Local Authority in their annual budget.

This Government is committed to making Irish business keenly competitive in ever more challenging global markets. In order to help SMEs to be competitive, we are striving to keep all costs on businesses as low as possible. Government actions to support small and medium sized businesses in the domestic economy have been set out in the Action Plan for Jobs 2012 and 2013 and work will continue in this respect in the context of the Action Plan for Jobs 2014.

Significant progress has been made in a number of areas, including:

- Improving Access to Finance through the Credit Guarantee Scheme and the Microenterprise Loan Fund Scheme;
- Tackling the issue of late payments through the transposition of the EU Late Payment Directive into Irish legislation;
- Development of a Single Licensing Application Portal; and
- Reform of the County Enterprise Boards through the establishment of new Local Enterprise Offices.

The Action Plan 2014, which is currently being finalised, will seek to build on the progress already made and is set to deliver a further suite of actions to support enterprise. SMEs will continue to be a key focus of this process.

Proposed Legislation

117. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the timetable for implementing the programme for Government commitment to reform the current law on employees' right to engage in collective bargaining under the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2001; if the legislation will ensure compliance by the State with recent judgments of the European Court of Human Rights; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47558/13]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Programme for Government contains a commitment to reform the current law on employees' right to engage in collective bargaining (the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2001), so as to ensure compliance by the State with recent judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. With this in mind, in late 2012 I wrote to relevant stakeholders inviting their observations on the matter. Submissions were subsequently received and a series of initial first step meetings took place between Departmental officials and stakeholders around mid-2013. Discussions with stakeholders are ongoing.

I hope to be in a position to put proposals to Cabinet soon. In this context, I am certain that satisfactory arrangements can be put in place that will reconcile Ireland's constitutional, social and economic traditions, and international obligations, whilst at the same time ensuring continued success in building Ireland's domestic jobs-base and in attracting overseas investment into the economy.

Questions Nos. 118 and 119 withdrawn.

Free Travel Scheme Applications

120. **Deputy Noel Coonan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when an application for a companion free travel pass will be finalised in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47429/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The Companion Travel Pass for the person named above was medically assessed by a Medical Assessor on 5 November 2013. The medical opinion has been conveyed to Household Benefits Section, Sligo and the applicant will be contacted shortly regarding the decision on her application.

Domiciliary Care Allowance Applications

121. **Deputy Noel Coonan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when an application for the domiciliary care allowance will be finalised in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47435/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): An application for domiciliary care allowance was received on 28th August 2013. The application was disallowed as the child was not considered to satisfy the qualifying conditions for the allowance and a letter issued on 23rd September 2013 advising of the decision. A review of this decision has been requested and additional information on this child's condition/care needs has been supplied. The person concerned will be notified of the outcome of this review as soon as it is completed.

Questions Nos. 122 to 124, inclusive, withdrawn.

Invalidity Pension Appeals

125. **Deputy Tony McLoughlin** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) in County Leitrim will have to wait over two years for a decision on an appeal for an invalidity pension. [47510/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an invalidity pension appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 21 October 2013. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. When these have been received from the Department, the case in question will be referred to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if required, hold an oral appeal hearing.

There has been a rapid and sustained increase in the number of appeals received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office since 2009 which has placed extraordinary pressure on the office.

Up to 2009, the average number of appeals received was 15,000 per annum whereas in 2012, the office received 35,484 appeals. In order to manage this increasing workload, significant resources and efforts have been put into reducing backlogs and improving appeals processing times for appellants, including the assignment of 15 additional Appeals Officers, in addition to 10 former Community Welfare Service Appeals Officers who joined the appeals office in 2011, bringing the total number of serving Appeals Officers to 41; reviewing and improving business processes; and implementing a new operating model within the appeals office. In addition, a major programme of process redesign and modernisation is underway in the Department in relation to many of its scheme areas, aimed at reducing backlogs and reducing the time taken by the Department to respond to requests from the appeals office for submissions in relation to appeals.

These measures have led to improvements in processing times and a significant increase in the number of appeals finalised from 17,787 in 2009 to 32,558 in 2012. The Chief Appeals Officer expects to finalise 6,000 more cases in 2013 than in 2012. Good progress is also now being made in reducing the number of appeals on hand from 20,414 at 1 January 2013 to 15,981 at 1 November 2013. The average processing time for appeals peaked in 2011 when the average time for an oral hearing was 52.5 weeks and for a summary decision was 25.1 weeks. In 2012 processing times improved by 10.3 weeks when the average time for an oral hearing dropped to 39.5 weeks while the time for a summary decision increased slightly to 27.8 weeks. This improvement has continued with the average processing time up to October 2013 reducing to 34.9 weeks for an oral hearing and 26.3 weeks for a summary decision.

A similar trend is reflected in processing times for invalidity pension appeals. In 2010 the average processing time for an invalidity pension oral hearing was 59.7 weeks while a decision requiring a summary decision took an average of 40 weeks. This had improved to 48.7 and 38.8 weeks respectively in 2012 and has further improved (up to October 2013) to 41.7 and 35.1 weeks respectively. Appeal processing times are calculated from the registration date of the appeal to the date of its finalisation. They include all activities during this period including time spent awaiting any clarification from the appellant, time in the Department for comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal put forward by the appellant, and any further investigation, examination or assessment by the Department's Inspectors and Medical Assessors that is deemed necessary. A considerable period of time is added to the process when an oral hearing is required because of the logistics involved in this process. While this process carries an inherent delay in terms of finalising an appeal, it also crystallises the flexibility and accessibility of the appeals system.

By its nature and because it is a quasi-judicial function, the processing of appeals takes time and reflects the fact that, by definition, the appeal process cannot be a quick one. The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

Question No. 126 withdrawn.

National Internship Scheme Administration

127. **Deputy Derek Nolan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will provide the most up to date figures of acceptance for JobBridge positions on a county basis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47518/13]

130. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of per-

sons who have applied to her Department for approval to go on the JobBridge scheme; the number of these that have been successful in obtaining a placement on the scheme; the average waiting time to receive such a placement; her plans to improve the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47542/13]

131. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection the length of time employers have to advertise jobs under the JobBridge scheme; if there is any obligation on employers to respond to unsuccessful applicants; if all applicants must be interviewed; if there are obligations on employers to use objective criteria when selecting participants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47543/13]

132. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection when she will implement the announcement that participants on JobBridge will be able to stay on the scheme for 18 months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47544/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 127 and 130 to 132, inclusive, together.

On 18 September last I announced the extension of the operating criteria of JobBridge to allow for a maximum cumulative period spent on JobBridge of 18 months, 9 months remaining the maximum period for a single internship. These changes will come into effect within the next week and full details of these changes will be advertised on the home page of the JobBridge website www.jobbridge.ie.

Advertisements remain on the JobBridge website for a maximum of 8 weeks but may be taken down before then by the host organisation and also may be re-advertised. Participation in the scheme is voluntary. The interview process and follow-up with candidates are matters for the host organisation. However, the Department has developed a tool-kit of best practice for internships (available at www.jobbridge.ie) and companies are encouraged to respond to all applications from jobseekers.

The Department does not keep statistics on the number of persons who apply for approval to go on JobBridge scheme or the average waiting time to receive such a placement. The application process is a matter for jobseekers and host organisations. As at 31 October, 2013, 22,633 placements had commenced since the scheme came into operation. I am considering the recommendations contained in the recent independent evaluation of JobBridge and any further changes to the scheme will be announced on www.jobbridge.ie.

The most up to date figures of acceptance for JobBridge positions on a county-by-county basis are set out in the following table.

Table 1. Breakdown of JobBridge interns by County since the Scheme came into operation

County	Finished	Current	Total
DUBLIN	5707	1953	7660
CORK	1592	555	2147
GALWAY	1081	374	1455
LIMERICK	815	342	1157
WATERFORD	563	209	772
KILDARE	554	203	757
DONEGAL	529	219	748
TIPPERARY	508	211	719

County	Finished	Current	Total
WEXFORD	475	183	658
KERRY	464	192	656
MAYO	369	191	560
LOUTH	398	157	555
WESTMEATH	390	147	537
MEATH	360	154	514
CLARE	341	160	501
WICKLOW	365	111	476
SLIGO	298	135	433
MONAGHAN	256	128	384
KILKENNY	247	82	329
LAOIS	226	86	312
CARLOW	211	85	296
CAVAN	201	91	292
OFFALY	191	84	275
ROSCOMMON	114	58	172
LONGFORD	131	36	167
LEITRIM	73	28	101
Total	16459	6174	22633

Carer's Allowance Appeals

128. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will expedite a carer's allowance appeal in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47519/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer having fully considered all of the available evidence, including that adduced at oral hearing, decided to allow the appeal of the person concerned. The person concerned has been notified of the Appeals Officer's decision. The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

Question No. 129 withdrawn.

Questions Nos. 130 to 132, inclusive, answered with Question No. 127.

Question No. 133 withdrawn.

Child Benefit Applications

134. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if and when child benefit will be awarded in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Carlow; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47582/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The child benefit claim of the person concerned was disallowed in July 2013 as she does not satisfy the Habitual Residence

Condition. She has been informed of this decision and her right to appeal the decision to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office. To date no appeal has been received in the Department.

One-Parent Family Payment Appeals

135. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if and when one-parent family allowance will be awarded in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Carlow; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47583/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The person concerned made an application for a one parent family payment on 4th July 2013. Her application was disallowed on the grounds that she was not habitually resident in the State. She was notified of the decision in writing on 29th July 2013.

The person concerned had appealed a decision made in March 2013 to disallow her application for basic supplementary welfare allowance on the grounds that she was not habitually resident in the State. The decision was upheld by the Social Welfare Appeals Office in July 2013 after she had submitted her application for one parent family payment.

Rent Supplement Scheme Payments

136. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when it is expected that outstanding matters relative to rent support are likely to be resolved in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Dublin having particular regard to the fact that the landlord has given an extension of time in this regard; if urgent consideration will be given in view of the fact that arrears have arisen from a period during which rent support was withdrawn and, though restored, did not reflect in full the arrears period; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47584/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The files of the persons concerned have been re-examined by my officials. The persons concerned have received their full rent supplement entitlements in respect of the periods that they have been deemed eligible. There are no arrears of rent supplement due.

Any arrears of rent considered outstanding are a matter between the landlord and tenant.

Rent Supplement Scheme Payments

137. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the maximum rent and level of rent support applicable in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 22; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47585/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): A review of entitlement to a rent supplement in the case of the person concerned has taken place. The correct level of rent supplement applicable for a person with this family composition is €501.40 per month with effect from 1st November 2013.

Back to Education Allowance Applications

138. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if and when back to school allowance is likely to be paid in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47586/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): An application for back to school clothing and footwear allowance was received from the person concerned on 4th of September 2013. In order to process the claim, further information was requested from the customer and this information has not yet been received. The relevant information has now been requested again and upon receipt of this information the application will be processed immediately.

Mortgage Interest Supplement Eligibility

139. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if mortgage interest support is payable in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47587/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The person concerned was in receipt of mortgage interest supplement up to 30 August 2010 when her eligibility for payment ceased. No application for mortgage interest supplement has been received from her since then. To establish her current eligibility she should contact the Mortgage Interest Supplement Unit, PO Box 1023, Naas, Co. Kildare, telephone 045 887833, email kildaremis@welfare.ie.

Employment Support Services

140. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) in County Kildare, who has already been approved for a five year computer course, is likely to be offered a position leading to a more permanent post; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47588/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): According to the records of the Department the person is in receipt of jobseeker's allowance and is also undertaking a pre-ECDL course. It is open to the person concerned to contact his local employment services office where staff will be in a position to advise him on what employment options may be available to him.

Supplementary Welfare Allowance Appeals

141. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current position regarding the progress of appeal in respect of basic supplementary welfare allowance or alternative in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 24; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47589/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that the supplementary welfare allowance and disability allowance appeals from the person concerned were referred to an Appeals Officer who has decided to convene an oral hearing of both cases. I am advised that the oral hearing is likely to take place before the end of November 2013 and that the person concerned will be informed as soon as arrangements for the oral hearing have been made.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in

relation to social welfare entitlements.

One-Parent Family Payment Eligibility

142. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason one-parent family allowance has been terminated in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47590/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The person concerned was requested to submit information in relation to an allowance she is currently receiving. The information was requested on 18 October 2013 and on 22 November 2013. To date this information has not been received and her claim has been suspended until the information requested has been supplied.

Guardian's Payment Appeals

143. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an oral hearing will be arranged to determine eligibility in respect of guardianship payment in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47591/13]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all of the available evidence, disallowed the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision dated 5th March 2013. The person concerned was notified of the Appeals Officer's decision on 15th March 2013 and was provided at that time with a detailed explanation of the basis for the Appeals Officer's decision to disallow the appeal. Under Social Welfare legislation, the decision of an Appeals Officer is final and conclusive and may only be reviewed in the light of additional evidence or new facts. The appeal, in this case, was closed on 15th March 2013 and I am advised that the person concerned made no further contact with the Appeals Office since that date.

In view of the lapse of time since the Appeals Officer made his decision and the decision was communicated to the person concerned, I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that it is not proposed to re-open the appeal in this case. However, in the event that the person concerned has additional evidence or new facts in support of her application for a guardian's payment, it is open to her to make a new claim to the Department of Social Protection.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

Commemorative Events

144. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if he will provide a detailed progress report on events planned for the 1916 centenary celebrations; the major events that are planned for County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47451/13]

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): I am committed to working with all interested partners to ensure that the centenary commemorative pro-

gramme is comprehensive, authentic and inclusive. The Easter Rising and the Proclamation of the Irish Republic will be at the centre of the programme. In keeping with the development of an authentic programme, I anticipate that all the principal sites relating to the Rising and ensuing events will feature in the commemorations. I am working with the Expert Advisory Group on Commemorations and partners in Government to bring forward projects such as the online release of the Military Service Pensions Archive, which will provide unprecedented public access to primary source material about the Rising.

A number of other special decade of centenary projects are in preparation, which will support research and inform discussion as we approach the centenary of the Rising in 2016. It is my belief that the Rising can best be commemorated by placing it in the broader cultural and historical context. In this regard, we have brought forward projects such as the *Century Ireland* initiative, in association with RTE and Boston College, which is already charting the lives of the participants in the Rising from their first appearances in public life through to the Rising itself.

The centenary of the founding of the Irish Volunteers will be commemorated this month. On this point, I met a number of local historians on Monday 2 September 2013 at the County Library in Tralee to explore the possibility of arranging a lecture to commemorate the founding of the Volunteers. It was decided to arrange a lecture to take place on Thursday 28 November at the County Library in Tralee.

Initiatives in 2014 will include the commemoration of the founding of the Irish Citizens' Army and Cumann na mBan, and special commemorative arrangements are being prepared for these organisations. For the comprehensive exploration of Irish life in the revolutionary period, I am keen that the programme would pay special attention to the economic and social conditions of the time. I am very grateful for the support of the Women's' History Association of Ireland in developing the arrangements for the centenary of Cumann na mBan and the wider issues of women in society at the time, including the campaign for electoral reform.

The arrangements to be brought forward for Easter 2016 throughout the country are under development at this time. Clearly, the centenary of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic will be a most important anniversary and I anticipate that the special arrangements for the occasion will be of interest internationally too. I would welcome the Deputy's views on the commemoration of the Rising and would be happy to discuss any proposals he may have.

Turf Cutting Compensation Scheme Payments

145. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if he will take steps to have an application for payment in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Westmeath in respect of a designated bog to which they are entitled to compensation and whereby a map has already been prepared showing the area in question and which no subsequent reply has been received in respect thereof, if same will now be reviewed and this person's entitlements furnished to them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47480/13]

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): The individuals referred to in the Deputy's Question have applied to sell their interest in land within a site designated as a special area of conservation, under the voluntary bog purchase scheme administered by my Department. I am advised that no map identifying the site or evidence of title have been received by my Department to date. An official of my Department spoke with the applicants' solicitor in February last to request evidence of title and to indicate that no map had been received in relation to this application. My Department will be in a position to consider the application further once these documents have been received.

Electricity Transmission Network

146. **Deputy Michelle Mulherin** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the technical reasons for EirGrid's decision to pursue a general policy of not undergrounding electricity power lines in Grid 25; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47526/13]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Pat Rabbitte): Neither the Government nor I seek to direct the energy infrastructure developers to particular technologies, sites or routes as was made clear in the July 2012 Government Policy Statement on the Strategic Importance of Transmission and Other Energy Infrastructure. That statement emphasises that these are matters for the developers and for the forward planning process through regional and local development plans and at project level through the development management process. In this context, energy infrastructure developers are encouraged to work with the forward planning processes at regional and local levels to set clear contexts for assessment of individual applications for planning consent and to facilitate as wide a degree of consensus as possible as to how and where to meet grid development needs. The Government, as detailed in the July 2012 Policy Statement expects the companies in making their choices of project specific technologies and routing, as well as mitigation measures, to take account of all relevant national and international standards, to follow best practice and ensure value for money and be informed by detailed consultation at local level. My understanding is that there is no single solution for any particular development and that technical solutions must be project specific. I also understand that conventional overhead line is still the most common solution adopted worldwide and still offers significantly lower investment costs than any underground alternative.

Commercial Rates

147. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government his views on the action that can be taken to deal with high commercial rates and assist small businesses (details supplied). [47516/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): Local authorities are under a statutory obligation to levy rates on any property used for commercial purposes in accordance with the details entered in the valuation lists prepared by the independent Commissioner of Valuation under the Valuation Act 2001. The levying and collection of rates are matters for each individual local authority. The annual rate on valuation (ARV), which is applied to the valuation for each property determined by the Valuation Office, to obtain the amount payable in rates, is decided by the elected members of each local authority in the annual budget and its determination is a reserved function. Rates income is a very important contribution to the cost of services provided by local authorities such as roads, public lighting, development control, parks and open spaces. Locally elected members adopt the annual rate on valuation they consider necessary in order to provide the required services.

I am acutely aware of the pressures on businesses at the present time. Local authorities have been asked by my Department to exercise restraint or, where possible, to reduce commercial rates and local charges for 2013. Local authorities have responded well to such requests in recent years and in 2013, 87 out of the 88 rating authorities have either reduced their ARV or kept it the same as in 2012. The reorganisation of local governance structures, set out in the Action Plan for Effective Local Government – Putting People First and to be given effect through the Local Government Bill 2013 currently before the House, provides an opportunity to achieve a

more coherent approach to rates and charges on a county-wide basis having regard to funding requirements and the need to support employment and business competitiveness.

Local authorities have a leading role in creating a pro-enterprise supportive environment to generate new jobs and sustain existing ones. They are committed to local economic development, and are best placed to meet many of the needs of businesses, in terms of infrastructure, local promotion and other key enabling measures. Under the Action Plan for Jobs, the local government sector has developed a sectoral strategy, *Supporting Economic Recovery and Jobs – Locally*, to promote employment and support local enterprise, including measures in the area of business charges, local enterprise and business support arrangements, procurement support, local development and community-based initiatives, the Green Economy and participation in employment support schemes.

As is evident from the local government sectoral strategy and the 2008 Forfás report, the cost of running retail operations in Ireland, commercial rates, on average, account for less than 5% of overall business costs. Notwithstanding this, I will continue to keep the approach to rates by local authorities under active review, and am determined that every avenue will be pursued to optimise efficiency and contain costs in the local government sector.

Local Authority Staff Numbers

148. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if he will provide details of the number of personnel-WTE attached to the processing of drivers licences in each local authority for that year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47421/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): My Department gathers quarterly data on staff numbers in local authorities. The data gathered do not provide detail in respect of individual grades or job titles within each local authority, and accordingly, the information requested is not available in my Department.

Social and Affordable Housing Eligibility

149. **Deputy Michelle Mulherin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if he will review regulation guidelines made pursuant to section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 which pressurises a husband and wife who are separated, where one remains in the family home which is in their joint names, to enter into a formal legal separation or divorce in order for the spouse vacating the family home to be deemed eligible for social housing support even if they have no other available accommodation which they can afford without State assistance and have a housing need in accordance with criteria laid down; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47450/13]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): It is a matter for each housing authority to determine the eligibility of individual households for social housing support, in accordance with section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 made thereunder. Regulation 22(1) of the 2011 Regulations provides that a household with alternative accommodation that would meet its housing need is ineligible for social housing support. Paragraph (2) of the Regulation clarifies that paragraph (1) does not operate to exclude from eligibility for social housing support an applicant who owns accommodation that is occupied by his or her spouse, from whom he or she is separated under a court order or

deed of separation. As part of an on-going review of the 2011 Regulations, my Department is examining the issue of whether specific provision is required in respect of separated persons applying for social housing support who own dwellings occupied by spouses from whom they are separated, but where no court order or deed of separation is in place.

Local Authority Housing

150. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government the options open to a local authority tenant who has been offered the possibility of purchasing the home from the local authority but where the valuation put on the property by the authority appears to be excessive; the rights the tenant has to challenge the valuation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47456/13]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): In the case of the 1995 tenant purchase scheme for existing local authority houses, which is now being terminated, a tenant who believes that the value of the house under the relevant regulations is lower than the housing authority’s valuation may submit a property valuation by a qualified valuer to the authority concerned. It is a matter for the authority to decide the extent, if any, to which it revises its valuation on receipt of such a valuation. Where there is a significant difference between the two valuations the case should be referred to the Valuation Office for a definitive valuation.

In the case of the incremental purchase schemes for local authority apartments and newly-built local authority houses, where a prospective purchaser believes that the value of the dwelling under the relevant regulations is lower than the housing authority’s valuation, the property value is determined by a valuer nominated by the prospective purchaser from a panel of valuers established by the authority.

Local Authorities Management

151. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if his attention has been drawn to the fact that legal advice presented to the current mayor of Sligo confirms that a meetings administrator designated by a county manager who fails in the obligation to issue notification to councillors for statutory meetings of the borough council is in clear breach of statutory duty; if it has been drawn to his attention that legal advice presented to the previous mayor of Sligo clearly stated that the county manager or his designated officials have a bounden duty to adhere to the mayor’s directions in relation to the convening of meetings of the borough council and that the county manager is not entitled to subvert both the standing order of the council and the legislation in relation to the convening of borough council meetings; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the Sligo county manager failed to ensure that his designated meetings administrator issued notification to elected councillors for statutory meetings of Sligo Borough Council which were to take place in April, May, September, October and November 2013; if it has been drawn to his attention that the Sligo county manager did ensure that his designated meetings administrator issued notification to elected councillors for statutory meetings of the borough council in June and July 2013; if it has been drawn to his attention that the manager failed to ensure that his designated meetings administrator issued notification to councillors for borough council meetings requisitioned by the mayor of Sligo for 21 October and the 4 November 2013; if he will consider introducing legislation which will prevent a county manager and his or her designated meetings administrator from subverting local democracy and from subverting local government legislation enacted

by the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47512/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): I refer to the reply to Questions Nos. 681 and 706 of 5 November 2013, which sets out the position. I am not aware of any legal advice to the current or previous mayor of Sligo Borough Council. I do not intend to introduce legislation as suggested.

Local Government Reform

152. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if the Local Government Bill 2013 addresses all of the concerns raised by the Council of Europe in its criticism of Ireland's local democracy; the specific changes that were made to the Local Government Bill 2013 arising from the criticism; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47552/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): The Action Programme for Effective Local Government, Putting People First, which was published in October 2012, sets out Government policy in terms of a comprehensive range of reforms in relation to local government structures, functions, funding, governance and operational matters.

A key objective of the local government reform programme is to address weaknesses in the existing system, including issues which were identified in the report on Local Democracy in Ireland adopted by the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in October 2013, such as the need for wider devolution of functions to local government, greater subsidiarity at local level, greater financial discretion for local authorities and increased consultation with local authority members associations. These issues are being addressed in the reform programme, particularly in the context of the Local Government Bill 2013, which is currently at Second Stage in the Dáil.

It should be noted that the Congress report specifically welcomes the Action Programme, endorses particular measures in the Programme including the structural changes at sub-county level, and recommends that the Programme be implemented rapidly with a view to devolving more powers and financial autonomy to local government. As outlined in the debate on the Congress report, the Government remains fully committed to the Action Programme and will continue to work towards delivering a local government system that is modern, fit for purpose, and which will be the primary vehicle for governance and public service at local level.

Property Taxation Yield

153. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government further to Parliamentary Question No.175 of 24 October 2013, when he decided that it has been necessary to defer defining a certain proportion of the proceeds of the local property tax to be retained in each local authority until 2015 rather than 2014 as initially promised; if this decision was a collective Government decision; if he will confirm the proportion of the proceeds of the local property tax that will be retained in each local authority in 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47553/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): The local government funding model will change considerably in 2014. Under the Finance (Local Property Tax) Act 2012, commencing in 2014, the Minister for Finance will pay

into the Local Government Fund an amount equivalent to the Local Property Tax paid into the Central Fund during that year; this revenue will be allocated to local authorities from the Fund. In addition, the establishment of Irish Water and its financial relationship with the local government sector will have a considerable impact on local authority financing.

The Government has indicated an intention to move to 80% retention of all Local Property Tax receipts within the local authority area where the Tax is raised. The establishment of Irish Water presents local government with significant organisational and financial challenges in 2014 and, in this context, it has been necessary to defer defining a certain proportion of the proceeds of the Local Property Tax to be retained in each local authority until 2015. This approach allows maximum flexibility in allocating Local Property Tax in 2014 with the priority to support those local authorities with weaker funding bases.

This decision has been taken in the context of Budget 2014. The 2014 Local Government Fund General Purpose Grants will be announced in due course.

I expect the Local Property Tax to have multiple benefits, including a more sustainable and resilient system of funding for local authorities and therefore a sounder financial footing for the provision of essential local services; greater local scope for financial decision-making concerning service provision - in particular, the inclusion of the local variation mechanism will further increase the autonomy of local authorities; and a strengthening of democracy at local level with a more active relationship between local authorities and local electorates. A stronger democratic relationship and clearer lines of accountability can only have a beneficial impact on service provision from the perspective of the service user.

Irish Water Establishment

154. Deputy Lucinda Creighton asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government further to Parliamentary Question No. 175 of 24 October 2013, the changes that occurred relating to the establishment of Irish Water presenting local government with significant organisational and financial challenges that had not previously been envisaged; the date on which he became aware of these additional financial challenges and the additional costs associated with these challenges; the total estimated additional amount in euro that had not previously been accounted for, to deal with the financial challenges in Irish Water; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47554/13]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Fergus O'Dowd): The establishment of Irish Water and its financial relationship with the local government sector will have a considerable impact on local authority financing from 2014.

Work is also underway on the funding model for Irish Water's operational costs, to ensure that Irish Water can fund the Service Level Agreements being put in place with local authorities for the delivery of water services in 2014.

In view of the organisational and financial impact on the local government system, it has been necessary to defer defining a certain proportion of the proceeds of the Local Property Tax to be retained in each local authority until 2015. This is principally a matter of change management, as opposed to the emergence of unanticipated costs. This approach allows maximum flexibility in allocating Local Property Tax in 2014 with the priority to support those local authorities with weaker funding bases.

The Exchequer proposes a direct equity investment of €240m towards the capital funding

of Irish Water in 2014. This will support projects to be included in Irish Water's Capital Investment Plan and will ensure that the entity is in a position to take on the water services investment programmes of the 34 water services authorities, including some 80 projects currently in progress. Irish Water will also finance some of its costs and the liabilities transferred from local authorities through borrowings in 2014.

Local Authority Housing Maintenance

155. **Deputy Simon Harris** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if there are guidelines or standards in place to ensure that all local authority houses are provided with heating and insulation to a sufficient standard; if such standards are specific to Ireland or correspond with specific European directives or regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47555/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): The statutory minimum energy performance standards (including insulation requirements) for dwellings are addressed under Part L of the building Regulations and the accompanying Technical Guidance Document (TGD L Dwellings). These regulatory requirements have been reviewed and upgraded intensively in recent times. Amendments to the regulatory requirements generally apply to new dwellings and do not apply retrospectively to existing dwellings save in specific circumstances where an existing dwelling undergoes a material alteration or is subject to an extension.

Directive 2010/31/EU on the energy performance of buildings requires EU Member States, *inter alia*, to ensure that statutory energy performance standards are set at a cost optimal level and to plan and work towards defining and achieving nearly zero-energy standards for new and existing buildings by 2020. The Directive does not specify minimum heating and insulation standards along the lines suggested. Ireland has made significant progress in this regard as previously outlined in the reply to Question No. 187 of 18 April 2013 which dealt comprehensively with the matter.

My Department is committed to the improvement of the insulation and general energy efficiency of local authority houses and to that end has in recent years run several funding programmes, accompanied by comprehensive technical guidance, directed at improving the overall energy performance standards within the existing social housing stock. In this regard there are currently an estimated 25,000 older local authority dwellings with low levels of energy performance due mainly to heat loss through the fabric of the building.

The Government's Infrastructure Stimulus Plan announced earlier this year includes a provision of €50 million for energy efficiency upgrade works for these 25,000 local authority homes.

My Department has notified allocations to local authorities totalling €10 million for spending this year on a suite of works to include roof, attic and wall **insulation** together with draught-proofing of windows and doors. Funding of €25 million in 2014 and €15 million in 2015 will enable appropriate **insulation** and energy efficiency measures to be undertaken on all 25,000 properties.

Local Authority Charges Application

156. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government his views on whether it is fair and appropriate that not-for-profit child care

facilities are subject to local authority rates; his plans to introduce legislation in the near future which would exempt not-for-profit child care centres from local authority rates liability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47561/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): Local authorities are under a statutory obligation to levy rates on any property used for commercial purposes, in accordance with the details entered in the valuation lists prepared by the independent Commissioner of Valuation under the Valuation Act 2001. With regard to the application of rates to **childcare** facilities, where **childcare** provision is within a community facility, operating in a non-profit capacity, commercial rates do not generally apply. The levying and collection of rates are matters for each individual local authority. The annual rate on valuation (ARV), which is applied to the valuation of each property, determined by the Valuation Office, to obtain the amount payable in rates, is decided by the elected members of each local authority in the annual budget and its determination is a reserved function.

However, it is a matter for the Commissioner of Valuation to decide whether or not a property is rateable and on what basis it is placed on the valuation list. The Valuation Office comes under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

I recognise that these are difficult economic times for many businesses and I am continuing to keep all matters relating to rates under regular consideration in my Department.

Water and Sewerage Schemes Provision

157. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government the position regarding the plan by Roscommon County Council to establish the west Roscommon regional water supply scheme, including the Castlerea regional water supply scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47564/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): The West Roscommon Regional Water Supply Scheme is included as a Water Treatment Plant Upgrade Contract at Granlahan to start in my Department's Water Services Investment Programme 2010 – 2013. Under the Annual Review of the Programme, carried out in 2011, my Department approved the inclusion in the programme of an Advance Networks Upgrade Contract – the Castlerea Urban and Regional Water Supply Improvement Works, at an estimated cost of €4.465 million.

The Supplementary Design Review Report for the scheme was approved by my Department in April 2013. I understand that Roscommon County Council is currently engaged in the process of selecting the preferred tenderer for the above-mentioned Advance Networks Upgrade Contract. The Council is also engaged in the process of procuring consultants to prepare Tender Documents for the Water Treatment Plant Upgrade Contract and the Castlerea element of the scheme.

Water and Sewerage Schemes Provision

158. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government further to his announcement on Friday last in County Roscommon regarding the upgrade of the four regional water supply schemes, when the letter of approval was issued to Roscommon County Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47607/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): The Arigna, Boyle/Ardcarne, Roscommon Central and South Roscommon Regional Water Supply Schemes are included as Water Treatment Plant Upgrade contracts to start and a Network Contract at construction in my Department's Water Services Investment Programme 2010 – 2013.

My Department's letter, approving the commitment of the necessary capital funding of just over €12 million for the scheme to enable Roscommon County Council complete the contract formalities with the successful tenderer and to commence, as soon as possible, the works involved in the Design Build Operate Contract on the scheme, issued on 5 November, 2013. This approval of funding provides for the construction of five Treatment Plants and other ancillary works on the scheme. The progression of this contract to construction is now a matter for Roscommon County Council.

Leader Programmes Funding

159. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if he will provide additional funding to the Cavan-Monaghan Leader group as they have a number of important projects awaiting approval and these projects, if undertaken, will have substantial economic impact across the Cavan-Monaghan region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47609/13]

160. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if he will provide additional funding with immediate effect to the Cavan-Monaghan Leader group as the reduction in funding of €2.1 million last May is having a very negative effect on a number of projects with good employment potential; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47610/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 159 and 160 together.

Cavan/Monaghan LEADER is contracted on behalf of my Department in relation to the LEADER elements of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013.

In regard to LEADER, during 2011, the European Commission approved a change in the maximum co-funding rate from 55% to 85% for the LEADER elements of Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2007 – 2013. This had the effect of reducing the available funding under the Programme from €427 million to an estimated €370 million.

It was therefore necessary to carry out a comprehensive review of the level of commitments and expenditure across the Programme in order to apportion the remaining funds among the Local Development Companies (LDCs), taking into account the level of commitments already entered into.

The redistribution of funding was conducted in as fair and equitable a manner as was possible and in the case of Cavan/Monaghan LEADER the revised allocation represents a decrease of 17.5% from their original allocation. Many of the other LDCs experienced similar reductions.

I am committed to the continued monitoring of this situation and my Department will review all commitments and expenditure levels later this month to ensure, in so far as is possible, that all available Programme funding is committed by end December 2013; allocations will again be revised if there is funding available for re-distribution.

Property Taxation Administration

161. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government his views on correspondence (details supplied) regarding the local property tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47624/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): Local Property Tax and its administration are matters for my colleague, the Minister for Finance.

Local Government Reform

162. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government further to the Government decision to shut down town councils and centralise local government within county council structures, the way the Government proposes to implement the decision; his plans for the buildings currently housing the local council offices; what will happen to all the workers employed within them; the measures being put in place for local authorities to take over this work; the amount of money that has been spent to date on preparatory works for this move, for example in County Kerry; the amount of money that has been given to Kerry County Council to help it take over the working of Killarney, Listowel and Tralee Town Councils; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47626/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): The Government's Action Programme for Effective Local Government sets out Government policy in relation to a range of local government reform measures, including the establishment of a new comprehensive model of municipal governance to strengthen local government within counties and address weaknesses and anomalies in the current system.

The Local Government Bill 2013, published on 17 October 2013 and currently at Second Stage in the Dáil, provides the legislative basis for many of the reforms set out in the Action Programme.

The Bill, as drafted, provides for the replacement of town councils by municipal districts, which, unlike the existing town councils, will be representative of all communities – urban and rural. The new governance arrangements will ensure that county council decision-making is brought closer to the local communities, without duplicate administrative or organisational overheads. In addition, as elected members will be elected for the municipal district in the first instance, this new structure will effectively eliminate duplicate representation.

Implementation of the reorganisation process is primarily a matter for each local authority. Advisory arrangements, involving a broad range of local government stakeholders, were established in December 2012 following the launch of the Action Programme with a view to informing, supporting and guiding the process of reform in local government structures and functions. As part of this process, a guidance framework has been provided to assist local authorities in the implementation of the reform programme in a timely and consistent manner. However, specific decisions on organisational issues, including the utilisation of their assets e.g. civic offices and the deployment of staff, arising from the implementation of the reforms remain a matter for individual local authorities having regard to local circumstances.

The Local Government Bill 2013 provides for the seamless transfer of functions from the local authorities that are to be dissolved to their successors, and as such the full range of local authority functions and services will continue to be delivered across each local authority area

following the enactment of the legislation.

Local Government Reform

163. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government under the new Local Government Act, whether it is proposed that the chairpersons of municipal authorities would not be able to use the title of mayor, if an amendment will be made and if he will consider allowing the chairperson of each municipal district to also assume the title of mayor of the major town, that in the past had a mayor of that town; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47630/13]

164. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government in view of the proposal that mayors of counties would no longer have the title of mayor and they would revert to being the chairperson or the cathaoirleach of the local authority, at a time when stronger relationships with other parts of Europe should be forged, his views on whether it is a retrograde step to lose the title of mayor and revert to the title of chairperson; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47631/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 163 and 164 together.

The Local Government Bill 2013 provides that mayoral titles may be used, as an alternative to the title Cathaoirleach, in certain instances, including in respect of Limerick City and County, Waterford City and County, and certain municipal districts. I am satisfied that the provisions of the Bill in this regard reflect appropriately the status and relevant application of the mayoral title and have no implications for relationships with other parts of Europe.

Water Services Funding

165. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government the amount of money that will be spent per year on Ireland's water system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47632/13]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): The Exchequer proposes a direct equity investment of €240m towards the capital funding of Irish Water in 2014. This will support projects to be included in Irish Water's Capital Investment Plan and will ensure that the entity is in a position to take on the water services investment programmes of the 34 water services authorities, including some 80 projects currently in progress. Irish Water will also finance some of its costs and the liabilities transferred from local authorities through borrowings in 2014.

Work is underway on the funding model for Irish Water's operational costs, to ensure that it can fund the Service Level Agreements being put in place with local authorities for the delivery of water services in 2014. Irish Water is working with local authorities to finalise the 2014 budgets associated with the proposed service level agreements. In parallel with this process, the Department has sought the advice of the Commission for Energy Regulation in relation to anticipated new operational costs associated with new functions for the entity which are likely to arise in 2014. The outcome of these processes will determine the overall funding requirement of Irish Water in 2014 from all funding sources.

Garda Vetting of Personnel

166. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason it takes in excess of six months for Garda clearance here when a request can be posted, processed and returned within one week from England (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47414/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): I am informed by the Garda authorities that it is not possible to check the status of the application referred to in the absence of details of a date of birth. If the Deputy will provide the additional information, I will have further enquiries made in the matter.

Garda Vetting of Personnel

167. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will take steps to expedite an application for a Garda clearance certificate application in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Westmeath which is required for their work with the Health Service Executive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47426/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): I am informed by the Garda authorities that no vetting application has been received in respect of the person to whom the Deputy refers. In the circumstances, I can only suggest that the person contacts the registered organisation involved.

Visa Applications

168. **Deputy Michelle Mulherin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the circumstances in which a visa will be granted to a dependent family member over 18 years contrary to general policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47455/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): Each visa application is considered on its individual merits with the onus resting on the applicant to satisfy the visa officer as to why the visa sought should be granted.

As every visa applicant and their family circumstances are unique, it is not possible to be completely prescriptive about the circumstances which would result in a visa application being approved for a dependent family member over 18 years old. In assessing a visa application a visa officer takes into consideration a number of factors before arriving at a decision.

My Department is currently working on a comprehensive family reunification policy document that will include guidelines on all of the main issues arising including eligibility, dependency, the financial resources necessary to support a dependant and any requirements that the person seeking entry must meet. It is my intention to publish this policy shortly and to make it available on the website of the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (www.inis.ie). It should also be noted that our existing policies in respect of certain classes of migration compare very favourably with many other jurisdictions.

Guidelines on the visa application process, including details of the required supporting documents, are available on www.inis.ie. Queries in relation to specific immigration cases may be made directly to INIS by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be

obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response from INIS is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Prisoner Data

169. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of persons currently on remand in prison; the length of time they are on remand; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47525/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): I can advise the Deputy that according to the most recent snapshot of the prisoner population taken on Thursday 31 October, 2013 there were 591 prisoners held on remand throughout the prison system. On the same date in 2012 there were 637 prisoners held on remand. The 2013 figure has a decrease of 46 or 7% on the 2012 figure. A detailed breakdown of the location of all remand prisoners is set out in the table. The majority of prisoners held on remand in Dublin are held in Cloverhill Prison which is the remand prison for those committed to prison on remand in the Dublin courts.

Prison	31 October 2013	31 October 2012
Mountjoy (M)	8	5
Mountjoy (F)	24	39
St. Patrick's Institution	16	34
Cloverhill Prison	320	335
Wheatfield Prison	18	36
Midlands Prison	34	22
Portlaoise	25	12
Cork Prison	30	37
Limerick (M)	44	44
Limerick (F)	5	7
Castlerea	67	63
Arbour Hill	0	3
Total	591	637

It is not possible to provide the length of time a prisoner spends on remand, as this would necessitate a manual search of each record to determine when the period of remand commenced as they may not actually be their committal date. This would require a disproportionate and inordinate amount of staff time and effort and could not be justified where there are other significant demands on resources.

Legislative Measures

170. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the constitutional and legislative provisions that protect against discrimination and incitement and hate crimes; his plans to strengthen the law in this area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47536/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): There are robust mechanisms already in place in legislation to deal with discrimination, hate speech and racist crime.

The Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2012 and the Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2011 prohibit discrimination on nine grounds in the supply of and access to goods and services and in the field of employment. This legislation is kept under ongoing review by my Department.

I have asked the members designate of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission to examine, as a priority, the potential impact of section 37 of the Employment Equality Acts on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons and undertake an extensive consultative process and formal assessment of the options for its amendment. I am committed, once this necessary consultation process is completed, to bringing forward Government proposals for necessary amendments to this provision. It is not possible at this point to say when this consultation will conclude and when I will be in a position to publish my proposals.

Under the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989, it is an offence, inter alia, to use words, publish or distribute written material, or broadcast any visual images or sounds which are threatening, abusive or insulting and are intended, or, having regard to all the circumstances, are likely to stir up hatred. The word “hatred” is defined as “hatred against a group of persons in the State or elsewhere on account of their race, colour, nationality, religion, ethnic or national origins, membership of the travelling community or sexual orientation”.

The State’s prosecutorial authorities have not brought to my notice any difficulties in bringing prosecutions under the 1989 Act.

In addition to the above legislation, where criminal offences such as assault, criminal damage, or public order offences are committed with a racist motive, they are prosecuted as generic offences through the wider criminal law. Judges are required to take aggravating (and mitigating) factors, including racial motivation, into account at sentencing.

In all the circumstances, I have no plans, at present, for legislative initiatives in relation to hate crime. However, more generally, the Government is committed to a strategic review of penal policy, including sentencing. The report of the working group conducting the review is expected early next year.

As interpretation of the Constitution is a matter for the courts, I cannot comment on Constitutional principles in this area of the law.

Fines Indexation

171. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if all fines defined in legislation are index linked by the CPI each year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47537/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): Part 2 of the Fines Act 2010, which was commenced on 4 January 2011, provides for the indexation of fines contained on the statute book up to the time of its enactment. All new legislation providing for the imposition of fines on summary conviction refer to a category of fine (Class A, B, C, D or E) which corresponds to a monetary value set out in the Act. There is no provision in the Act for the automatic application of increases or decreases in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) to these monetary values. Instead, my Department keeps these values under review and when movements in the CPI so warrant it, the monetary values in the Fines Act can be amended by the Oireachtas.

Legislative Measures

172. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the background to the introduction of section 36 of the Defamation Act 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47538/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): Section 36 of the Defamation Act 2009 concerns publication or utterance of blasphemous matter and the related Section 37 concerns seizure of copies of blasphemous statements. These sections replaced section 13 of the Defamation Act 1961 which provided for the offence of blasphemous libel punishable by monetary and prison penalties - a term of up to 2 years imprisonment was possible.

The provisions in sections 36 and 37 have regard to the legal advice from successive Attorneys General in the context of blasphemy, to the effect that we must address this matter as a constitutional obligation and ensure no default in compliance with the Constitution in relation to Article 40.6.1.i. Thus, in repealing the previous provision in the 1961 Act, a replacement provision was required.

Prior to its examination by the Constitutional Convention on 3 November, this issue had previously been examined by the Constitutional Review Group in its 1996 Report, which recommended deletion of the references contained in Article 40.6.1.i. of the Constitution. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution, in its July 2008 Report entitled "*Article 40.6.1.i - Freedom of Expression*" which dealt, *inter alia*, with blasphemy also recommended deletion. However, the Committee saw no need for a Constitutional amendment in the short term, but rather that we might avail of any appropriate opportunity in the future.

Garda Operations

173. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the Garda Commissioner has responded to this Deputy's correspondence to the Minister dated 23 July 2013 (details supplied); if he will now reply to the matter raised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47563/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): As the Deputy will be aware, I referred the correspondence in question to the Garda Commissioner for his observations and he has directed the Assistant Commissioner Traffic to examine the issues raised and to provide a comprehensive report on the matter. As soon as I have received the Commissioner's response I will be in further contact with the Deputy.

Deportation Orders Re-examination

174. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the current residency status in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Cavan; if their status gives them eligibility to apply for naturalisation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47574/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): The person concerned is a failed asylum applicant. Arising from the refusal of his asylum application, and in accordance with the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), the person concerned was notified, by letter dated 29 December, 2005, that the then Minister proposed to make a Deportation Order in respect of him. He was given the options, to be exercised within 15 working days, of leaving the State voluntarily, of consenting to the making of a Deportation Order or of making written representations to the then Minister setting out the reasons why a

Deportation Order should not be made against him. Written representations have been submitted on behalf of the person concerned.

The position in the State of the person concerned will now be decided by reference to the provisions of Section 3(6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and Section 5 of the Refugee Act 1996 (as amended) on the prohibition of refoulement. All representations submitted will be considered before a final decision is made. Once a final decision has been made, this decision, and the consequences of the decision, will be conveyed in writing to the person concerned.

The Deputy might wish to note also that a representative of the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service wrote to the legal representative of the person concerned on 8 October, 2013 requesting specific information relating to the person concerned. Upon receipt of the requested information, the position in the State of the person concerned can be further considered.

The Deputy should note also that as the person concerned has no current right of residency in the State, he would not be in a position to meet the lawful residency criteria applicable to persons applying to my Department for a Certificate of Naturalisation.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the INIS of my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response from the INIS is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Deportation Orders Re-examination

175. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the extent to which the case in respect of prohibition of refoulement has been examined in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Limerick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47575/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): The person concerned is a failed asylum applicant. Arising from the refusal of his asylum application, and in accordance with the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), the person concerned was notified, by letter dated 24 April, 2009, that the then Minister proposed to make a Deportation Order in respect of him. He was given the options, to be exercised within 15 working days, of leaving the State voluntarily, of consenting to the making of a Deportation Order or of making written representations to the then Minister setting out the reasons why a Deportation Order should not be made against him. In addition, he was notified of his entitlement to apply for subsidiary protection in accordance with the provisions of the European Communities (Eligibility for Protection) Regulations 2006.

The person concerned, through his legal representative, submitted written representations pursuant to the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended).

The position in the State of the person concerned will now be decided by reference to the provisions of Section 3(6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and Section 5 of the Refugee Act 1996 (as amended) on the prohibition of refoulement. All representations submitted will be considered before a final decision is made. Once a final decision has been made, this decision, and the consequences of the decision, will be conveyed in writing to the person concerned.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the INIS of my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response from the INIS is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Residency Permits

176. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding residency-entitlement to naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Carlow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47576/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): The parents of the person concerned were granted temporary permission to remain in 2000, under the arrangements then applicable to non-EEA national parents of children born in Ireland prior to January, 2005. I am informed that the person concerned registered with his local immigration officer for temporary permission to remain in the State, under stamp 2A conditions, from 8 October, 2012 until 1 September, 2013.

Should the person concerned wish to seek a renewal of his temporary permission to remain in the State, he should submit a written request to my officials in the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) of my Department c/o PO Box 10003, Dublin 1. He should enclose with his request evidence of his current address, his original passport, two passport size photographs signed on the back, his original birth certificate and letters from all schools attended to prove continuous residency in the State. Upon receipt of the appropriate documentation, his case will be examined and a decision communicated to him in due course.

An application for a certificate of naturalisation has been received on behalf of the person concerned and is currently being processed.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the INIS by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up-to-date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response from the INIS is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Deportation Orders

177. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the extent to which their health situation might be taken into account in determination of residency/extension of residency in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Westmeath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47577/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): I am informed by the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) that the person referred to claimed asylum (along with her son) as a national of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Information received from the United Kingdom immigration authorities indicated that this person is in fact of Angolan nationality and her case was considered on that basis.

The person in question is the subject of a Deportation Order signed on 17 September 2013. The Deportation Order was made following a comprehensive and thorough examination of her case (including any health issues) under Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999, as amended and under Section 5 of the Refugee Act 1996, as amended. Refoulement was not found to be an issue. No issues arise under Section 4 of the Criminal Justice (UN Convention against Torture) Act, 2000. Consideration was given to private and family rights under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The effect of the Deportation Order is that the person concerned must leave the State and remain thereafter out of the State. The enforcement of the Deportation is a matter for the Garda National Immigration Bureau.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the INIS by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response from the INIS is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Naturalisation Applications

178. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the current and expected position in terms of eligibility for naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47578/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): I am advised by the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) that a valid application for a certificate of naturalisation has been received from the person referred to by the Deputy.

The application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

The Deputy may wish to note that queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to INIS by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been established specifically for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response from INIS is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Visa Applications

179. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the extent to which an application for an extension of visitor's visa has been processed in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47579/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): I am advised by the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) of my Department that the person referred to by the Deputy made an application for permission to remain in the State on 25 October 2013. Applications are dealt with in chronological order and INIS will be in touch with this person shortly.

The Deputy may wish to note that queries in relation to the status of individual immigra-

tion cases may be made directly to INIS by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been established specifically for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response from INIS is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Deportation Orders Re-examination

180. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding the determination of eligibility for residency-naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47580/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): The person concerned is a failed asylum applicant. Arising from the refusal of her asylum application, and in accordance with the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), the person concerned was notified, by letter dated 15 November, 2010, that the then Minister proposed to make a Deportation Order in respect of her. She was given the options, to be exercised within 15 working days, of leaving the State voluntarily, of consenting to the making of a Deportation Order or of making written representations to the then Minister setting out the reasons why a Deportation Order should not be made against her. In addition, she was notified of her entitlement to apply for subsidiary protection in accordance with the provisions of the European Communities (Eligibility for Protection) Regulations 2006.

The person concerned submitted an application for subsidiary protection. When consideration of this application has been completed, she will be notified in writing of the outcome.

In the event that the application for subsidiary protection is refused, the position in the State of the person concerned will then be decided by reference to the provisions of Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and Section 5 of the Refugee Act 1996 (as amended) on the prohibition of refoulement. All representations submitted will be considered before a final decision is made. Once a final decision has been made, this decision, and the consequences of the decision, will be conveyed in writing to the person concerned.

The Deputy should note that as the person concerned has no current right of residency in the State, she would not be in a position to meet the lawful residency criteria applicable to persons applying to my Department for a Certificate of Naturalisation.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the INIS of my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response from the INIS is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Residency Permits

181. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will review the case of extension of residency in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 7; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47581/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): The position with this person

remains the same as was previously stated in my replies to Parliamentary Questions No. 159 of 17 October 2013, No. 194 of 3 October 2013 and No. 1103 of 18 September 2013. This person currently has permission to be in the State on Student conditions until 31/01/2014. They do not qualify for a Stamp 4 status and when their permission expires they will have to leave the State.

The Deputy may wish to note that queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to INIS by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been established specifically for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response from INIS is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Legal Matters

182. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the advice he would offer persons (details supplied) in relation to a Revenue matter. [47623/13]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): The specific matters raised by the Deputy relate to a case that has already been the subject of related proceedings at the Office of the Revenue Commissioners and under the professional conduct regime of the Law Society where a solicitor has been disciplined and, I am led to understand, struck off the Register of Solicitors. I do not hold responsibility for the relevant actions of the independently functioning Office of the Revenue Commissioners nor for those of the Law Society which is the duly appointed statutory body responsible for the regulation of solicitors under the Solicitors Acts 1954 to 2008. Consequently, the Deputy has raised specific matters that lie outside my official remit as Minister for Justice and Equality. It would not be appropriate for me to provide legal or other advice in relation to those matters by way of a Reply. At the same time, I would anticipate that the Law Society and the Revenue Commissioners, having previously dealt with the matters concerned, will be in a position to make every effort to resolve the situation in a fair manner as may be appropriate to the facts of the case.

Single Payment Scheme Payments

183. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when the disadvantaged areas scheme payment will issue in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47412/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): An application under the Single Payment / Disadvantaged Areas Scheme was received from the person named on 5 March 2013. This application was processed and payment generated on 17 October 2013. The payment is currently held by my Department awaiting updated bank details to be submitted by the applicant.

Also a Transfer of Entitlements application was received on 31 July 2013, from the person named requesting the transfer of 37.89 Single Farm Payment entitlements from the joint herd number held with his late mother into his sole name.

As this transfer was by way of inheritance, it was necessary to request testamentary documentation in support of this transfer. Under the Will of the deceased, other persons are the rightful beneficiaries of the Single Payment entitlements. Therefore, before the requested transfer can be completed, these persons must indicate their intention, if they so wish, to waive their

rights in favour of the person named.

My Department has requested the necessary waivers on three separate occasions. Upon receipt of the outstanding documentation the application will be processed.

Commonage Division

184. **Deputy Noel Coonan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if any of the commonage parcels (details supplied) in County Galway were subject to ground inspections since 2008 under the single payment scheme process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47415/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): As required by the Commission, all commonage land parcels declared under the Single Payment Scheme and other Direct Aid Schemes were reviewed by my Department during the period from 2008 to 2010. The objective of this review included the identification and exclusion of ineligible features e.g. roads, houses, forests, lakes, quarries, etc. The review was carried out by ground inspection or ortho-photography, or a combination of both. The commonage parcels referred to were part of this review. Keelderry commonage has been the subject of a number of ground inspections and has also been subject to a number of appeals to the Appeals Office.

Ash Dieback Threat

185. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on the confirmation of ash dieback disease in a hedgerow in Ballinamore, County Leitrim; if he established where the disease originated; the quantity of firewood that has been lost through the culling of ash trees; if restoration works will be carried out to the stock proof fencing damaged by the removal of the trees and the ground impacted by the works; if the trees that were removed will be replaced at a future date; and will there be a compensation package for the inconvenience caused to some farmers through the early rehousing of stock in order to facilitate the tree removal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47431/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The first finding of the Ash dieback disease in Ireland was confirmed in County Leitrim in October 2012 at a forest plantation which had been planted in 2009 with trees imported from continental Europe. This plantation was cleared of these imported ash trees by the end of October 2012. All findings of the disease since then have been associated with imported stock up until the confirmation last month that hedgerow ash trees within and close to this formerly infected plantation tested positive for the disease. It is likely that the disease has spread from the imported trees in the formerly infected plantation to the hedgerow.

The quantity of firewood that has been felled as a result of this operation is currently being calculated. Stock proof fencing is being carried out on the site where fencing has been damaged. Repairs are being made to drains or where ground has been damaged. Other works including reseedling of damaged patches of ground and provision of appropriate hedging trees will also be carried out.

Whilst my Department is doing everything possible to minimise any inconvenience to landowners affected by ash dieback disease, there are no plans to introduce a compensation package.

Animal Identification Schemes

186. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the timeframe for his Department to change to a web-based-only animal registration and grant application; the steps he is taking to make his Department's web page more user-friendly and to have the ability to include all the relevant animal information that may be required; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47440/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): Overall, my Department's IT systems and the use of these systems, including web based interaction with its customers and clients, is at the very high end by any standard. IT offers a wide range of modern, online and mobile services to our customers and the online uptake of these services over the internet is steadily increasing.

The Animal Identification and Movement (AIM) System that the Deputy refers to is developed using modern web-based technology and it holds data in relation to cattle, sheep, pigs and horses. The information held on AIM is of critical importance in providing consumer, public health and trade assurances in relation to our farming, food and meat processing industries.

The AIM system is fully internet compliant and it is used online by animal tag supply companies, meat export factories, livestock marts, export assembly centres and local authority abattoirs. The system also interacts with Farm Management packages and with the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF). AIM is also used directly online by Farmers and their authorised Agents and in the first 9 months of 2013 there were 1,951,810 calf registrations on AIM of which 855,756 (43.8% of the total) were carried out online.

My Department also operates the Animal Health Computer System (AHCS), which is fully internet compliant and a major feature of this system is that Private Veterinary Practitioners, who carry out testing under the disease eradication schemes, are able to access and update the system over the internet. Over 15 million individual animal tests are recorded on AHCS annually and combined with the AIM system, is critical in the operation of animal identification, movement, testing and disease control programmes. AIM and AHCS combined allow my Department to trace animal movements in the event of a disease outbreak and the data is also used to check compliance with eligibility criteria for various schemes that my Department administers.

In relation to the farm schemes operated by my Department, the online submission of Single Farm Payment (SFP) applications annually has been a significant feature of my Department's online services over the past number of years and this has proven to be very popular. SFP online applications increased by a further 12.7% in 2013 and a total of 73,340 claims were filed online by the closing date of 15 May 2013. This represents 56% of all SFP applicants for this year.

I introduced a new online feature in 2012 with regard to on-line mapping whereby relevant maps can now be edited and submitted on-line with the SFP application. This is further evidence of my ongoing commitment to maximise the use of technology for the benefit of farmers. The uptake in SPS online map edits increased by 18% in 2013, with 13,959 applicants digitising map changes directly online.

This week my Department launched an online facility to enable Forestry premium recipients who have registered for online services, to apply for their 2014 forestry premium through the www.agfood.ie portal. The development of the online Forestry premium application service, initiated originally in 2012, also allows Forestry clients to view some of their payment

history and maps of their forest plantations and ultimately to receive their payments earlier than they would have using the old paper based system.

In February of this year, I also announced a new online service for 2013 Nitrates Derogation applications and plans which can be submitted on-line by farmers and their agents registered with www.agfood.ie. This development continued my Department's policy of using technology to simplify procedures for farmers and also reduce the potential for application errors.

In order to broaden the communication channels and to provide timely information to farmers using modern communication technologies, I introduced a mobile phone text messaging system recently to relay relevant information such as updates on scheme payments, deadlines, promoting new services and disease outbreak alerts. My Department used this text messaging facility in the last few weeks to notify farmers of their interim Nitrogen and Phosphorus statement covering cattle numbers held on the farm for the 9 month period January to September 2013. Text messages were issued to those farmers whose cattle numbers would indicate that they may be approaching or exceeding the limits set down in the Nitrates regulations. My Department has issued over 600,000 such information text messages directly to Farmers on their mobile phones in the last 12 months.

I also launched a mobile website (<http://m.agriculture.gov.ie>) which provides better mobile access to the more popular areas of the main website. The service has been designed to work better across a range of modern mobile devices and it will automatically link into the main website when greater detail is required.

This continuing increase in online uptake and my commitment to the rolling out of new online and mobile services underlines my dedication to improving the way we provide services to farmers.

Agriculture Schemes Payments

187. **Deputy Noel Coonan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a single farm payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary; the reasons for the delay in payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47441/13]

188. **Deputy Noel Coonan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a disadvantaged area aid payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary; the reasons for the delay in payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47442/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 187 and 188 together.

The person named submitted an application under the 2013 Single Payment and Disadvantaged Area Schemes on 5 May 2013. EU Regulations governing the administration of these schemes require that full and comprehensive administrative checks, including in some cases, land eligibility inspections, be completed before any payments issue.

In order to meet the EU requirements, the application concerned was one of a number which was selected for inspection. The application was initially examined via remote sensing (Satellite Inspection). As over claims were determined on some parcels, these were sent for ground inspection.

As soon as the inspection and related processes are completed, the application concerned will be progressed with the intention of issuing any payment due as soon as possible. In the

event that any queries arise officials in my Department will shortly be in contact with the person named.

Disadvantaged Areas Scheme Payments

189. **Deputy Noel Coonan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a disadvantaged area aid payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary; the reasons for the delay in payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47443/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): Processing of the application received under the 2013 Disadvantaged Areas Scheme has recently been finalised with payment due to issue directly to the nominated bank account of the person shortly.

Disadvantaged Areas Scheme Payments

190. **Deputy Noel Coonan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a disadvantaged area aid payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary; the reasons for the delay in payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47444/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): An application under the 2013 Single Payment / Disadvantaged Areas Scheme was received from the person named on 30 April 2013. Following the processing of this application issues relating to the verification of compliance with the minimum stocking density were identified.

Under 2013 Disadvantaged Areas Scheme, there are two criteria to be satisfied in relation to those applicants availing of equines to meet the minimum stocking density requirement. First, the holding itself must meet the definition of an Equine Breeding Enterprise and second, horses, in order to be taken into account for stocking density purposes, must be aged one to five years and, where older, must be a breeding mare for the purposes of the Scheme.

While the person named submitted twelve equine passports to my Department, as none was in respect of a breeding mare that foaled in either 2010, 2011 or 2012, the Scheme criteria have not been met. Accordingly, no payment is due under the 2013 Scheme.

Single Payment Scheme Payments

191. **Deputy Noel Coonan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a single farm payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary; the reasons for the delay in payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47445/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): An application under the 2013 Single Payment/Disadvantaged Areas Scheme was received from the person named on 30 April 2013. The processing of this application has recently been finalised and payment will issue directly to the nominated bank account of the person named shortly.

Harbours and Piers Funding

192. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding the promised pier for the fishing community of Cromane, County Kerry;

if the promises will be honoured; if funding is available for this project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47453/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): Cromane Pier is in the ownership of Kerry County Council and responsibility for its repair and upkeep rests with that Local Authority in the first instance.

Under the Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme my Department has, in previous years, provided funding for the development and repair of Local Authority owned harbours, piers and slipways subject to the availability of exchequer funding.

No application for funding in respect of Cromane Pier was received from Kerry County Council in 2013, but any application for funding in future years by Kerry County Council will be given consideration subject to available exchequer funding and overall national priorities.

Disadvantaged Areas Scheme Payments

193. **Deputy Michelle Mulherin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason for the delay in a payment now due under the disadvantaged area scheme in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47474/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): Payment under the 2013 Disadvantaged Areas Scheme issued directly to the nominated bank account of the person named on 5 November 2013.

Agriculture Schemes Payments

194. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when single farm payment will issue in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47489/13]

195. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a payment under the disadvantaged area scheme will issue in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47492/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 194 and 195 together.

As processing of the application of the person named has recently been finalised, payments in respect of both Schemes are due to issue shortly to the nominated bank account of the person named.

Forestry Grants

196. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will receive their forestry grant payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47498/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): This plantation failed to meet the required standard in November 2012 and April 2013. My Department

was recently notified that the outstanding remedial works have now been completed. Another site inspection will be arranged shortly and the case will then be re-examined.

Single Payment Scheme Payments

197. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will receive their single farm payment; the reason for the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47501/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): As processing of the application of the person named has recently been finalised, payment is due to issue shortly to the nominated bank account of the person named.

Single Payment Scheme Payments

198. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will receive their single farm payment; the reason for the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47502/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): As processing of the application of the person named has recently been finalised, payment is due to issue shortly to the nominated bank account of the person named.

Horse Racing Industry Development

199. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on correspondence (details supplied) regarding the future of the Irish thoroughbred industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47503/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I welcome the publication of an 'Analysis of the Economic Impact of the Irish thoroughbred Industry, October 2013'. This detailed analysis of the thoroughbred industry, commissioned by the Irish Thoroughbred Breeders' Association, is a very useful piece of research for anybody with an interest in the sector.

I am acutely aware of the importance of the thoroughbred sector to the Irish economy and its pre-eminent position on the world stage as a global leader in the bloodstock industry. Indeed only last week the Irish thoroughbred sector was a key element in the major trade mission I led from Ireland to the Gulf States.

I note that the ITBA Report estimates the industry contributed €1.1bn in economic output and supported 14,000 jobs in 2012. The Report identifies challenges facing the industry and suggests a range of actions aimed at securing the future of the industry.

The ITBA Report raises the issue of the taxation of betting and possible changes to the rate of VAT to be charged on horses. Taxation policy is solely the responsibility for the Minister for Finance who, earlier this year, introduced the Betting (Amendment) Bill 2013 which is aimed at updating the system of taxation applying to the betting industry.

Following from a judgement delivered by the European Court of Justice, 14th March 2013,

(Case C-108/11), it was necessary for the Minister for Finance to make changes to the rate of VAT applied to horses. These changes are contained in the Finance (No. 2) Bill 2013, will take effect from 1st May 2014. However, the supply of horses intended for use in the preparation of foodstuffs or for use in agricultural production will remain at the 4.8 per cent rate. Supplies of other horses and the hiring of horses will be chargeable at the reduced rate of 9 per cent and the reduced rate of 13.5 per cent will apply to supplies of insemination services for horses.

The ITBA Report also raises issues with regard to prize money and the importance of the establishment of overseas markets. Horse Racing Ireland (HRI), a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001 and representing key sectors of the thoroughbred industry, is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the industry. Decisions regarding prize money fall within the remit of HRI. Irish Thoroughbred Marketing (ITM) is a subsidiary of HRI. It is funded by HRI and by the Irish bloodstock industry, including breeders, sales companies and stallion farms. ITM provides service and support to overseas visitors interested in the Irish thoroughbred racing and breeding industry. The principal focus of ITM is to generate inward investment and to increase export sales of Irish bloodstock.

Successive Governments have recognised the importance of the horse industry for our country, and have supported it through legislation and policy initiatives. Infrastructural supports are provided to the industry through various measures operated by my Department. This commitment to investment has enabled Ireland to develop into a world centre of excellence for horse racing and breeding. The Deputy is aware of my personal commitment to this indigenous Irish industry. Since becoming Minister I have taken an active interest in the industry and I commissioned an independent review of the industry in 2012. Officials in my Department are currently preparing legislative proposals aimed at giving effect to the recommendations contained in the Indecon report on the Irish Horse Racing Industry (2012) which I plan to bring before the Cabinet for approval as soon as possible.

Disadvantaged Areas Scheme Payments

200. **Deputy Paul J. Connaughton** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a disadvantaged area scheme payment and single farm payment will issue in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47521/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): An application under the 2013 Single Payment/Disadvantaged Area Scheme was received from the person named on 15 May 2013. Following processing, an issue was identified in respect of one land parcel declared on the application by the person named but also declared on the application of another party. My Department has written to both parties regarding this matter. Upon receipt of a satisfactory reply, the application of the person named will be further processed.

Single Payment Scheme Expenditure

201. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the average decrease in single farm payments in 2013 as a result of changes to the multiannual financial framework; when the Commission published its amending letter to the draft 2014 Budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47545/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): As a result

of changes in the EU multi-annual financial framework it is necessary that payments in respect of the 2013 Single Payment Scheme be reduced in order to ensure that the overall EU budget ceiling is respected. The original proposal from the Commission was to apply a deduction of 4.001079% on all payments in excess of €2,000. However, following the publication of Amending Letter 2 under the 2014 EU Budgetary procedure, the percentage reduction to be applied was reduced to 2.453658% on all payments in excess of €2,000.

While agreement in principle has been reached on the reduced deduction, the matter has yet to be formally adopted by the EU Council of Ministers. It is expected that it will be adopted at the Foreign Affairs Council at its meeting of 18th November 2013.

Milk Quota Cessation

202. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the efforts he has made to get a derogation from payment of the super levy on milk, in view of the fact that milk quotas are to be abolished totally in 2015, for the production years 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 as long as Irish production does not exceed the quota by more than 10% in 2013-2014 and 15% in 2014-2015; the result of these efforts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47547/13]

203. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the volume of milk produced during this production year to date compared to last year; his views on whether the milk quota provided to Ireland will be exceeded and the super levy apply; the likely cost of this to Irish dairy farmers; if he has taken any steps at a European level to try and get a derogation for Ireland from the super levy in 2013/2014 and 2014/2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47548/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 202 and 203 together.

The total (non adjusted) volume of milk produced in the first six months (April 2013 to September 2013) of the current milk quota year was 3,795 million litres, which represents 68% of the national quota allocation for the 2013/2014 milk quota year. The corresponding figures for the same period last year was 3,664 million litres, representing 66% of the national quota for that year. Based on monthly quota estimates, this means that Ireland is 0.42% over quota at end September 2013 compared to a position of being 2.14% under quota at the same point last year.

Given the very favourable milk production conditions that prevailed throughout the summer and early autumn there is a strong likelihood that Ireland will exceed its quota and consequently incur a super levy fine for this milk quota year unless milk producers take corrective action for the second half of the year. I do acknowledge the frustrations of farmers wishing to expand in response to both the favourable weather conditions and the strong milk prices but I do want to remind farmers that it remains critically important that they continue to manage their enterprises within quota until the expiry of the milk quota regime on 31st March 2015. The decision has been taken at EU level that quotas will continue until this point and producers should plan their production accordingly. I would urge farmers to immediately take stock of their milk supply situation and discuss any potential over production with their Teagasc dairy advisor. I would also remind suppliers who are in, or approaching an over quota position, that they should only sell their milk through their usual purchaser in compliance with the Milk Quota Regulations and to sell through any other channels is an offence. Likewise milk purchasers have a clear obligation to only accept milk for purchase when they are absolutely certain of the provenance of that milk.

I and my officials have been extremely active in seeking to secure a soft landing for suppliers in the lead-up to milk quota abolition in 2015 and the 2008 CAP Health Check agreement granted Member States increased quota between 2007 and 2014 - 9.3% in Ireland's case. However for a small number of countries, including Ireland, those quota increases may be insufficient to accommodate increases in milk production which have been driven by supply and demand dynamics and the prospect of a quota free production environment after 2015. I have discussed this matter extensively with other EU Agriculture Ministers and with the European Commission, and officials from my Department have raised this issue at EU level and with other Member States. However, attempts to consider measures beyond those agreed in 2008 have been resisted and neither of the interim reports on the 2008 CAP Health Check Agreement, in 2010 and 2012, proposed any further changes to the quota regime.

The decision to abolish quotas from April 2015 was confirmed in the new CAP reform package as agreed under the Irish Presidency in June and efforts now must be on planning for the expansion opportunity which this provides for Ireland and as set out in the Food Harvest 2020 Strategy. In the meantime, it is clear that quotas will remain in place until their planned abolition in April 2015 and any expansion in supply before then needs to be synchronised with their abolition.

Common Agricultural Policy Reform

204. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if farmers who own commonage but do not actively farm the commonage, but farm their enclosed land will be eligible for the single farm payment on either or both of their commonage and enclosed land under the new Common Agricultural Policy 2014-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47549/13]

205. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if it is sufficient for a farmer with commonage land to ensure that this land is maintained in good agricultural and environmental condition in order to be eligible for the single farm payment; if under the new Common Agricultural Policy 2014-2020, farmers with commonage will be required to maintain stock on the commonage; if so, the reason for this provision; if he opposed it in the negotiations of the CAP; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47550/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 204 and 205 together.

Under the new Direct Payments regime which will come into effect in 2015, commonage land continues to be eligible for payment. However, there is a requirement that the farmer must be 'active' which, in the case of marginal type land such as mountain commonage, involves carrying out a 'minimum activity' which is to be defined by each Member State. The European Commission is empowered to adopt delegated acts setting out the framework within which MS shall define the minimum activity. Discussions on delegated acts are continuing and I am not in a position to comment further on the nature of such 'minimum activity' until these acts are finalised.

It should also be noted that Member States have the option of excluding land where 'grasses and other herbaceous forage' is not predominant. If such land is considered eligible, Member States have the option to apply a reduction co-efficient to such land whereby the declared number of hectares would convert into a reduced number of eligible hectares. I intend to finalise Ireland's position on these and other Direct Payment issues before the end of the year.

Live Exports

206. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps being taken to ensure that EU common market rules apply to the live export of cattle to Britain; the reason there have been difficulties experienced by UK farmers in slaughtering British fattened, Irish born cattle; the specific measures he is taking to have this problem addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47557/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The live export trade, whether to other EU member states or to third countries, serves a dual purpose in stimulating price competition for domestic cattle and satisfying a real demand in overseas markets. My Department and the Agencies under its aegis are committed to facilitating this trade to ensure that producers secure the highest possible sustainable price returns for Irish beef and live exports.

Bord Bia, through its international network of overseas offices, actively supports the development of the live export trade through the provision of market information, developing market access and promotional activity. Ireland's trade with Britain – the highest-priced market in Europe – remains dominated by the beef trade accounting for some 50% of our export volume and at around 250,000 tonnes is equivalent to 750,000 cattle with a high level of penetration in the multiple retail sector.

However, the potential to grow the live trade to Britain is constrained by the labelling system operated by these retail chains in relation to cattle born in this country and exported live for finishing and processing in the UK. As the Irish-born/UK-finished proposition is seen as difficult to communicate to consumers and likely to create unnecessary labelling complications, the retailers' long-standing policy is to market British and Irish beef separately. This means that beef must be sourced from animals originating in one country; i.e. born, reared and slaughtered in the same country.

While Bord Bia has repeatedly raised this issue in its discussions with British retailers over the years, there are no indications that this policy dating from 1996 is likely to be soon reversed. Nevertheless, Bord Bia in its ongoing interactions with British customers will continue to pursue all opportunities, including through any change in labelling policies, to maximise the full potential of the beef and livestock trade with our largest trading partner.

Children in Care

207. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the basis on which the children of a person (details supplied) Dublin 15 have been taken into care; the extent to which they received information in this regard at the meeting which took place on 29 October last; if the grounds for keeping the children in care have been adequately explained to the family; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47593/13]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I have requested the information from the HSE and I will revert to the Deputy when this information is to hand.

Medical Card Eligibility

208. **Deputy Kevin Humphreys** asked the Minister for Health if it is possible for a person in receipt of the automatic extra €10 for being over 80 years of age to give up that extra pay-

ment to enable them to meet medical card gross income limits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47422/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): Medical Card and GP Visit Card eligibility for persons aged 70 or older is based on assessment on a gross income basis and takes account of all income, as set out in the Health Act 1970 (As Amended).

For persons aged 70 or older who are assessed as ineligible under the gross income thresholds that apply, they may also have their eligibility assessed under the means tested medical card scheme. This assessment is based on net income and assessable outgoing expenses and the qualifying income thresholds under this scheme are lower than over-70s gross income thresholds. If a person is means assessed ineligible for a medical card under the general scheme, and that person has other social, medical or financial circumstances relevant to an assessment of their ability to provide for their medical needs or the medical needs of any dependants they may have, these factors will be considered to decide if a medical card or GP visit card should be approved on discretionary grounds under the 'undue hardship' or 'undue burden' provision of the medical card scheme.

Orthodontic Service Waiting Lists

209. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Health when orthodontic treatment will be approved in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Laois; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47446/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): The HSE provides orthodontic treatment to patients based on their level of clinical need. An individual's access to orthodontic treatment is determined against a set of clinical guidelines and priority is given to patients with greatest needs. The HSE has been asked to examine the specific query raised by the Deputy and to reply to him as soon as possible.

Medical Card Applications

210. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding an application for a medical card in respect of persons (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47454/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): The Health Service Executive has been asked to examine this matter and to reply to the Deputy as soon as possible. The Health Service Executive operates the General Medical Services scheme, which includes medical cards and GP visit cards, under the Health Act 1970, as amended. It has established a dedicated contact service for members of the Oireachtas specifically for queries relating to medical cards and GP visit cards, which the Deputy may wish to use for an earlier response. Contact information has issued to Oireachtas members.

Long-Term Illness Scheme Applications

211. **Deputy Patrick Nulty** asked the Minister for Health if an application for a long-term illness scheme book will be expedited in respect of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 15 ; the reason for the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47487/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): The HSE is responsible for the administration of the Long Term Illness Scheme, therefore, the matter has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Medical Card Applications

212. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Health when a determination will be made on an appeal for a medical card in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47497/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): The Health Service Executive has been asked to examine this matter and to reply to the Deputy as soon as possible. The Health Service Executive operates the General Medical Services scheme, which includes medical cards and GP visit cards, under the Health Act 1970, as amended. It has established a dedicated contact service for members of the Oireachtas specifically for queries relating to medical cards and GP visit cards, which the Deputy may wish to use for an earlier response. Contact information has issued to Oireachtas members.

Primary Care Centre Provision

213. **Deputy Patrick Nulty** asked the Minister for Health when construction of Corduff primary care centre will commence and if the funding for the project is in place. [47505/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): Delivery of health-care infrastructure is a service matter. Therefore your question has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

Local Drugs Task Forces Funding

214. **Deputy Patrick Nulty** asked the Minister for Health the allocation to the Blanchardstown Local Drug Taskforce for 2014; and the allocation made in 2011, 2012 and 2013 in tabular form. [47507/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): In line with the National Drugs Strategy, the Government is committed to continuing support for initiatives to tackle the drug problem. No decisions have been taken yet in relation to the allocations to Drugs Task Forces for 2014. The matter is currently under consideration. It is anticipated that Drugs Task Forces will be informed of their allocations later in the year.

The allocation made to support community drug initiatives in the Blanchardstown Local Drugs Task Force area from 2011 to date is outlined in the table.

-	2011	2012	2013
Allocation	€1,152,227	€1,124,343	€1,090,613

Primary Care Centre Provision

215. **Deputy Patrick Nulty** asked the Minister for Health when construction of Navan Road Primary Care centre will commence; and if funding for the project is in place. [47508/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): Delivery of health-care infrastructure is a service matter. Therefore your question has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

Medical Card Applications

216. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Health when a determination will be made on an application for a medical a card in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47514/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): The Health Service Executive has been asked to examine this matter and to reply to the Deputy as soon as possible. The Health Service Executive operates the General Medical Services scheme, which includes medical cards and GP visit cards, under the Health Act 1970, as amended. It has established a dedicated contact service for members of the Oireachtas specifically for queries relating to medical cards and GP visit cards, which the Deputy may wish to use for an earlier response. Contact information has issued to Oireachtas members.

Misuse of Drugs

217. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health his position regarding the use of cannabis for medical purposes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47522/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): Under the Misuse of Drugs Act, 1977, the manufacture, production, preparation, sale, supply, distribution and possession of cannabis or cannabis-based medicinal products are unlawful except for the purposes of research.

My Department is aware that cannabis for medicinal use has been legalised in some countries and that there have been several studies internationally on the therapeutic effects of cannabinoids for a number of medical issues. Notwithstanding the Government's reluctance to loosen the controls on cannabis generally, Department officials have engaged with experts on how authorised cannabis-based medicinal products for patients may be legally prescribed by medical practitioners and used by patients. Draft Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Regulations which will give effect to this are being finalised and it is anticipated that they will be introduced early next year.

Departmental Schemes

218. **Deputy Michelle Mulherin** asked the Minister for Health when he will introduce the scheme to replace the motorised vehicle grant scheme for persons with disabilities; if this will be done as a matter of priority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47524/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): Conscious of the position of the Ombudsman that the Motorised Transport Grant Scheme was illegal in the context of the Equal Status Acts the grant was closed on 26th February earlier this year. The scheme remains closed.

An inter-departmental group, chaired by the Department of An Taoiseach has been working to develop detailed proposals for the operation of a new statutory scheme for consideration by

Government.

Medical Card Applications

219. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if and when a medical card will be awarded in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Carlow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47592/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): The Health Service Executive has been asked to examine this matter and to reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

The Health Service Executive operates the General Medical Services scheme, which includes medical cards and GP visit cards, under the Health Act 1970, as amended. It has established a dedicated contact service for members of the Oireachtas specifically for queries relating to medical cards and GP visit cards, which the Deputy may wish to use for an earlier response. Contact information has issued to Oireachtas members.

Medical Card Applications

220. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding determination of medical card in the case of persons (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47594/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): The Health Service Executive has been asked to examine this matter and to reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

The Health Service Executive operates the General Medical Services scheme, which includes medical cards and GP visit cards, under the Health Act 1970, as amended. It has established a dedicated contact service for members of the Oireachtas specifically for queries relating to medical cards and GP visit cards, which the Deputy may wish to use for an earlier response. Contact information has issued to Oireachtas members.

Medical Card Applications

221. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the procedure to be followed in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare who recently received a reminder that their medical card was under review; if such review is independent of their parents' medical card in view of the fact that they are aged 12; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47595/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): The Health Service Executive has been asked to examine this matter and to reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

The Health Service Executive operates the General Medical Services scheme, which includes medical cards and GP visit cards, under the Health Act 1970, as amended. It has established a dedicated contact service for members of the Oireachtas specifically for queries relating to medical cards and GP visit cards, which the Deputy may wish to use for an earlier response. Contact information has issued to Oireachtas members.

Tobacco Control Measures

222. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will reconsider the proposal for plain packaging for tobacco products (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47625/13]

Minister for Health (Deputy James Reilly): As the Deputy will be aware, Government approval was received on 28 May 2013 to begin the process of introducing standardised packaging of tobacco products in Ireland.

Research shows that standardised packaging will:

- Increase the noticeability, recall and impact of health warning messages;
- Reduce the ability of packaging to mislead consumers to believe that some products may be less harmful than others; and
- Reduce the attractiveness of the tobacco product, for both adults and children.

Ireland is party to legally binding agreements between the EU and three major tobacco companies which aim to strengthen anti-smuggling measures. In addition, the Protocol to Eliminate the Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products was agreed at the FCTC Conference of the Parties in November 2012, and Ireland will sign and ratify that protocol.

The Office of the Revenue Commissioners is responsible for tackling the illicit trade in cigarettes and tobacco products. Combating this illegal activity is a high priority for Revenue, whose work in this field has been guided in recent years by its *Strategy on Combating the Illicit Tobacco Trade 2011-2013*. The intention is that a further strategy will be put in place, when the current one comes to an end, to act as the strategic focus for the ongoing extensive work against the smuggling and sale of illicit products.

In relation to packaging, it is important to note that the Revenue Commissioners have advised that the tax stamp, which contains a range of sophisticated security features, is a key means for them to distinguish between legal and illegal products, irrespective of the way in which the cigarettes are packaged.

Driver Licences

223. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide details, in tabular form by local authority, of the number of driver licences issued in 2012; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47421/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The following tabular statement provides details of the number of driving licences broken down by licence type issued by each Local Authority in 2012.

Type of Licence

Local Authority	Driving Licence	Learner Permit	Total
County Councils	-	-	-
CARLOW	5,775	2,748	8,523
CAVAN	7,697	3,169	10,866
CLARE	13,795	4,501	18,296

Local Authority	Driving Licence	Learner Permit	Total
CORK	57,710	20,718	78,428
DONEGAL	17,176	5,438	22,614
GALWAY	27,239	9,901	37,140
KERRY	17,262	5,977	23,239
KILDARE	20,138	8,628	28,766
KILKENNY	10,093	4,116	14,209
LAOIS	7,449	3,415	10,864
LEITRIM	3,589	1,199	4,788
LIMERICK	16,100	5,183	21,283
LONGFORD	4,168	1,638	5,806
LOUTH	12,086	4,985	17,071
MAYO	14,672	4,700	19,372
MEATH	18,918	7,132	26,050
MONAGHAN	8,069	2,435	10,504
OFFALY	8,568	3,416	11,984
ROSCOMMON	7,086	2,302	9,388
SLIGO	7,296	2,236	9,532
NORTH TIPPER- ARY	8,603	3,042	11,645
SOUTH TIPPER- ARY	9,263	3,994	13,257
WATERFORD	7,219	2,307	9,526
WESTMEATH	8,548	3,368	11,916
WEXFORD	17,591	6,476	24,067
WICKLOW	15,196	5,702	20,898
City Councils	-	-	-
DUBLIN	122,834	53,004	175,838
LIMERICK	4,909	2,326	7,235
WATERFORD	4,452	2,175	6,627
TOTAL	483,501	186,231	669,732

Taxi Regulations

224. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will ensure that the taxi service and the transportation of citizens in hackneys in Trim, County Meath, is adequately policed. [47420/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Alan Kelly): The regulation of the taxi industry, including enforcement, is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the provisions of the Public Transport Regulation Act, 2009. NTA currently has 8 enforcement officers and it carries out enforcement activities nationally in conjunction with An Garda Síochána, whose members are also authorised persons for the purposes of enforcement of the regulations concerning small public service vehicle (SPSV) services.

In line with the recommendations of the Taxi Regulation Review Report 2011, the Taxi Regulation Act 2013 provides for a suite of enforcement measures with a focus on ensuring the

suitability of persons to hold a licence to drive an SPSV and for on-going compliance with the SPSV regulations. Under the Act the enforcement capacity of the NTA can be enhanced through service agreements and provision has also been made so that breaches of SPSV regulations can be brought under the fixed charge notice system operated by An Garda Síochána - this will have a significant impact on the future 'on-street' enforcement capability.

The NTA is also the lead agency with responsibility for implementation of the recommendations of the Taxi Regulation Review Report 2011. I have forwarded your Question to the NTA for information and attention. If you have not heard from the NTA within 10 working days please contact my private office.

Rail Services

225. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that people are now sitting for up to three hours on train floors on route Sligo-Dublin 17.05, 07.26 as there are no seats; a family have also reportedly been forced to sit on the ground of the toilets on the 7.26 train as there were no seats, once these trains reached Maynooth there is serious overcrowding; the issue remains that the carriages have been shortened from six to four to save fuel; his views on whether this new system is a breach of health and safety standards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47439/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The issue raised is a matter for Irish Rail and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply from the company within ten working days.

Driver Licences

226. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the locations of the new drivers licence centres; if the centres are publicly or privately owned; if lease agreements have been entered into for these centres; the duration of the leases for each individual centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47452/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Following a competitive procurement process, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) awarded a contract for the operation of front office customer services in relation to the National Driver Licensing Service (NDLS) to SGS (Ireland) Ltd. of 29th October 2013, the service will operate from 34 full-time centres and 2 part-time offices around the country. The list of public office locations is available on the RSA website.

The specific information requested by the Deputy in relation to ownership of the centres is a matter for the RSA. I will ask to RSA to reply directly to the Deputy on this issue and if a response has not been received within 10 days, the Deputy should contact my office.

Road Projects

227. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will prioritise the building of the new Ballyvourney to Macroom-Ovens road; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47457/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2007 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Within its capital budget, the assessment and prioritisation of individual projects is a matter in the first instance for the NRA in accordance with Section 19 of the Roads Act. Noting the above position, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NRA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

The Gathering Events

228. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to build on the success of The Gathering; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47458/13]

235. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the work he and his agencies are carrying out in relation to building on the legacy of The Gathering; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47466/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 228 and 235 together.

The Gathering Ireland 2013 aimed primarily to generate additional tourist numbers and revenue in 2013. However, it also aimed to have a longer-term impact. We set a target of 325,000 visitors and we are well on the way to meeting that, but The Gathering was never just about visitor numbers and revenues. It is also about community pride and strengthening links with the diaspora.

The Gathering helped to strengthen existing links with Irish communities abroad and create new connections. Tourism Ireland will continue to work with the diaspora networks and will include this global family as part of its future promotional work overseas. The networks and databases created through The Gathering will also remain as a valuable asset to Irish tourism.

A number of Gathering-related events and festivals have already been identified as having potential to run again. Similarly, the success of the Emerald Isle Classic college football game, which was a key part of the marketing campaign for the Gathering, is being built on with next year's game between Penn State – with the largest alumni association in the US - and the University of Central Florida in Croke Park.

The Gathering also made a vital contribution to the local community. The Gathering network also provided extensive training to more than 2,500 people and these community engagement skills will endure and be available to support other local events.

Tourism Policy

229. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans for the development of Spike Island and Cork Harbour as a tourist attraction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47459/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): While my Department provides capital funding for investment in tourism product development through Fáilte Ireland, it is not directly involved in the development and promotion of tourist attractions. However, I am informed that the board of Fáilte Ireland recently approved a grant of €2,500,000

to Cork County Council for the development of the *Fortress Spike Island* experience. The Fortress Spike Island project is to be developed around three principal themes – military heritage, penal heritage, and stories of enforced transportation. These themes will allow visitors to get a real sense of the place of Spike Island in Irish history and indeed the wider history of the British Empire and the world. These are also areas in which there is strong interest, both in Ireland and overseas, especially Great Britain. It also resonates with the “decade of centenaries” which we have now entered on the island of Ireland. I am informed that the Council presented a detailed market assessment which indicates that the proposed development on Spike Island will have a broad appeal across many international tourism market segments.

I also understand that Cork County Council placed its application for funding in the context of the Interpretive Framework for Cork City and Harbour, which was commissioned by Fáilte Ireland to guide the tourism development of the area. This will place Spike Island as part of the wider effort to maximise the tourism potential of Cork and its harbour in coming years, which the tourism agencies will continue to support directly and indirectly. I look forward to the completion of the Fortress Spike Island experience which will play a key part in the development of tourism in the Cork city and harbour area in the coming years.

Sports Capital Programme Administration

230. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he expects to invite applications for the next round of the sports capital programme; if there will be changes to the terms and conditions of the programme and the application process from the last round; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47461/13]

258. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he expects to be in a position to announce or receive applications for major or minor capital sporting grants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47605/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): I propose to take Questions Nos. 230 and 258 together.

Departmental officials are currently working on the details of the new Programme, including any changes to the terms and conditions, and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement before the end of the year. My Department has developed a new portal on the Department’s website which must be used by organisations to register, to apply for funding (when the Programme is open for applications) and to manage the drawdown of any new grants allocated after 2013. Any interested organisation should register on www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie.

Tourism Capital Investment Programme

231. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide further details on the additional funds for tourism capital provided in budget 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47462/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I was pleased to welcome the announcement in Budget 2014 of an additional €8 million in capital investment for the Wild Atlantic Way. The Wild Atlantic Way is set to be Ireland’s first long-distance touring route, stretching along the Atlantic coast from Donegal to West Cork. It is planned to develop it into an attraction of international scale, on a par with the Garden Route in South Africa or the Great Ocean Road in Australia, that will achieve greater visibility for the west coast of Ire-

land in overseas tourist markets. It will be a central feature of our overseas promotion efforts through Tourism Ireland in 2014, as we bring Ireland's magnificent scenery to the world, and I understand the overseas tourist trade has already given the product a strong endorsement.

I am informed that this funding will ensure the completion of route signage, provide for the development and enhancement of discovery points on the route as well as other infrastructural improvements. While my Department provides the capital funding for investment in tourism product such as the Wild Atlantic Way, it is not directly involved in developing or managing such product. The development of the Wild Atlantic Way is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland and I have referred the Deputy's question to the agency for further information in relation to its future development. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Tourism Industry

232. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the response of the airline industry to the abolition of the travel tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47463/13]

255. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which it is expected that air travel routes and options will improve as a result of the abolition of travel tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47602/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 232 and 255 together.

The zero rate travel tax initiative is part of a process aimed at generating new airline routes into Ireland and will come into effect from April 2014. There has been a positive response to the initiative from airlines so far with Ryanair and Aer Lingus Regional both announcing details of new routes and increased services from Dublin, Shannon, Cork and Knock. Ryanair has said it will grow its traffic at Irish airports by at least one million passengers per annum from April 2014 in response to this initiative. To date it has announced new routes and additional services at Shannon and Knock. These account for around 380,000 of the projected one million increase and are estimated to support in the region of 380 jobs.

Aer Lingus Regional has also announced a 10% increase its flights from Cork and Dublin. I would like to see further announcements of this kind from those and other airlines to the various Irish airports. More flights into Ireland at more locations will mean more visitors from overseas, and a bigger tourism dividend. The Irish airports and Tourism Ireland have attractive incentive and marketing programmes available which will help support new services and build on the success of The Gathering in the months ahead.

VAT Rate Reductions

233. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the continuation of the 9% VAT rate for the tourism industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47464/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I strongly supported the continuation of the 9% VAT rate on the basis that the initiative had proved to be a major success, improving the competitiveness of the tourism industry, helping to create thousands

of new jobs and contributing to the growth in overseas visitors and revenue. The continuation of the reduced rate is recognition by the Government of the importance of the tourism industry to the economy. Together with other Budget initiatives such as the reduction in the travel tax to zero, the raising of the VAT threshold for small businesses, the capital investment in the Wild Atlantic Way and continuing measures such as the diesel rebate for coach operators, it will build on the success of The Gathering and support the increased number of jobs already in place in the sector and assist in the creation of new jobs. I thank my colleague Minister for Finance for maintaining the rate and urge tourism businesses to fully utilise the reduced rate while it remains in place to maintain value for money and support growth and job creation.

Tourism Industry

234. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide an overview of tourism performance in the year to date and his expectations for 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47465/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Tourism performance for the year to date has been very positive. The most recent published figures from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, show that there were over 5.4 million overseas visits to Ireland in the nine month period between January and September 2013 representing a 6.4% increase on the corresponding period of 2012. All of our main target overseas markets show growth levels with the number of visits from Mainland Europe up 5.1% for the first nine months of 2013; the number of visits from Britain was up by 3.5%; the number of visits from North America was up by 14.6% for the first nine months while there was a 13.7% increase in the number of visits from other long-haul markets.

The overall target for the year of The Gathering was to increase the number of overseas visits by 325,000 and the data suggests we are well on target to achieve this. The general response to The Gathering at home and abroad has been overwhelmingly positive. Gatherings took place throughout the country and according to Fáilte Ireland, all tourism stakeholders including accommodation providers, carriers, restaurants and attractions are reporting positive results from the initiative.

In terms of next year, overall sentiment for travel to Ireland remains good. Tourism Ireland is currently finalising its Business Plan for next year and I will be launching their 2014 Marketing Plans in early December. Furthermore, I am confident that measures such as the retention of the lower vat rate for tourism services, the reduction of the air travel tax to zero and the increased air access to Ireland will ensure that Irish tourism continues to grow in 2014.

Question No. 235 answered with Question No. 228.

Tourism Policy

236. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide an update on the tourism policy review; the number of submissions received to date; the key issues emerging and when he expects to announce same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47467/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Tourism Policy Review was formally launched by Minister Ring and me on 11 September in Dublin Castle. Over 90 individuals from representative bodies, key stakeholders and academia attended the

event which marked the publication of a consultation document, raising a series of questions regarding policy priorities for Irish tourism and inviting everybody with an interest in Irish tourism to respond. The responses to this consultation exercise will then feed into the final policy review and statement. The document has been circulated widely to tourism stakeholders and all Government Departments and is available to download on my Department's website (www.dttas.ie). The closing date for submissions has been extended to 22 November 2013.

In terms of the responses to date, as of 05/11/2013, a total of 100 submissions have been received from a wide variety of interested parties. The consultation process is also being progressed by means of a series of workshops which are ongoing. This will allow consideration of the views raised and other relevant evidence and analysis before commencing drafting of the new policy in the New Year with a view to finalising it by Easter 2014.

Question No. 237 answered with Question No. 11.

Ports Development

238. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he expects to bring forward legislation to give effect to the measures outlined in the ports policy document published earlier this year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47469/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): One of the principal recommendations of National Ports Policy which will require legislative amendments is the proposed transfer of control of the Ports of Regional Significance to local authority control. In August my Department published a Regulatory Impact Analysis type consultation document regarding these proposed amendments to the Harbours Acts. The consultation period has now concluded and my officials are considering the submissions received and have commenced preliminary work on the Heads of the Bill, which will form the basis for a round of bilateral discussions between the Department and relevant companies and local authorities in November and December.

The new Bill will also seek to legislate for some of the new initiatives introduced in the area of corporate governance since the Government assumed office - such as the appearance of Chairmen designate before the Oireachtas committee, a stated requirement of certain board level skillsets and the establishment of a public expressions of interest system to apply for board membership. I hope to progress the drafting of the Bills as quickly as possible and will of course, subsequent to Government approval, present the Heads to the Oireachtas committee for their opinion in due course.

Public Bike Schemes

239. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide an update on the extension of city bikes schemes to other cities outside of Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47470/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Alan Kelly): Work is well advanced within the National Transport Authority on finalising proposals for the roll out of public bikes in regional cities (Limerick, Cork and Galway). Significant progress has been made in relation to the award of the contract for the supply, installation, operation and maintenance of the bike schemes. It is hoped that this contract can be awarded early in 2014 with construction to commence shortly thereafter. Funding to meet the capital investment

costs of public bikes in other cities has been identified within the five-year capital allocation for Smarter Travel and Carbon Reduction Measures announced in 2012.

The delivery of the Regional Cities Bike Scheme was also dependant on a separate process to explore the potential for a sponsorship contract to defray some of the costs associated with the introduction of the Scheme. This process has been completed and I was delighted when it was announced recently that Coca Cola emerged as the successful sponsor for the Scheme. The vision behind the Scheme is to develop an environmentally friendly means of public transport that is healthy, relatively inexpensive and will ensure an improved quality of life in each of the city's natural and built environment.

Public bike schemes have the potential to enhance the city centres and provide a significant boost to the development of a cycling culture. It has been four years since Dublin bikes launched in Dublin city. It has been a resounding success with over 5 million rentals since its launch and 35,000 long term subscribers. I hope to hear similar exciting results from the regional cities over the next few years.

Sports Funding

240. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the total funding for sport in 2014 compared to previous years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47471/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): The total funding in my Department's Vote for sport in 2014 will be settled when the Revised Estimates Volume is published in December.

Question No. 241 answered with Question No. 8.

Air Services Provision

242. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the expected impact of the abolition of travel tax on Cork Airport; his views on the plans in place to allow Cork Airport to grow its passenger numbers; the reason changes in passenger numbers at Cork Airport are moving in the opposite direction to increasing figures at the other two State airports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47473/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Cork and Dublin Airports are owned and managed by the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA), operating under a commercial mandate. As such, the business of working to increase passenger numbers at Cork Airport is a matter for DAA and Cork Airport management and it is not something in which I have a direct role.

I should say however, that the elimination of the air travel tax from next April is a clear indication of Government support for air travel and Irish tourism generally. Coupled with the decision to maintain the tourism and hospitality VAT rate at 9%, it is now up to the tourism agencies, the airlines, the airports and all the players in the tourism and aviation sectors to build on these significant Government initiatives. I expect to see all these stakeholders renewing their efforts in marketing and promoting both the existing and the potential additional connectivity with the UK, Continental Europe, the US and other destinations. In this regard, I strongly welcome recent announcements by both Ryanair and Aer Lingus Regional with regard to the launch

of new services at a number of airports, including Cork to East Midlands and increased capacity to Birmingham and Manchester.

Driver Licence Applications

243. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide in tabular form regarding each of the new national driver licence centres, the population of each of the local authority areas in which the centres are based; the number of personnel in each centre on 30 October 2013 who dealt with customer applications; the number of applications on that date; the number of personnel whole-time equivalent who dealt with driver licences in the same local authorities prior to the introduction of the new system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47477/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The operation of the National Driver Licensing Service is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority (RSA). I have therefore forwarded this request to the RSA for direct reply, and I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

Cycling Facilities Provision

244. **Deputy Arthur Spring** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the works to be carried under the National Cycle Network Programme 2014-2016 will be tendered to small and medium-sized businesses or carried out in-house by local authorities; the person who will be awarded the funding. [47491/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Alan Kelly): My Department will expect local authorities who receive funding under the National Cycle Network Funding Programme 2014-2016 to maximise value for money in project delivery as far as possible and to secure all possible savings in the procurement process without compromising standards. Decisions related to project management and delivery will be a matter for the successful authorities under the NCN Programme but I would envisage that projects will be delivered using a mix of in-house staff resources and, when required, outside contractors that will be engaged through a competitive tender process.

Job Creation

245. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has considered the Irish Hotels Federation paper on job creation and training in the Irish hospitality industry; if he is concerned that career opportunities within the sector are not being fully exploited due to current training policy; if he sees need to focus on craft training; if he is concerned about a possible skill shortage in the future; if he will support the establishment of a tourism training division within Solas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47533/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I have received a paper from the IHF entitled "Job Creation and Training in the Hospitality Industry" which sets out the IHF's concerns in relation to training and skills in the Irish Hotel sector. I am also aware that the National Skills Bulletin published in June this year noted that Ireland as a whole has an excess labour supply overall with a low magnitude of skills shortages in some niche areas. The bulletin found that while there are no shortages of chefs in the labour market there are potential

retention issues.

In that regard, it is worth noting that in 2012 Fáilte Ireland provided training and business support to 16,994 trainees, students and, employees and employers in the tourism sector. In this context, 1,600 students received funding to allow them pursue Hospitality Craft and Tourism courses including Culinary Arts in the Institutes of Technology.

In looking forward to renewed growth in the sector, consideration will have to be given to the appropriate balance of direct enterprise support, entry level training and advanced/professional training. SOLAS, employers, further and higher education providers - particularly the Education and Training Boards - and Fáilte Ireland will all have complementary roles to play in that regard. This is an issue that has been raised as part of the ongoing tourism policy review and is being considered also in that context.

Haulage Industry Cabotage Regulations

246. **Deputy John Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the current situation between Ireland and the UK and Europe relating to Irish hauliers and the problems they are encountering with the authorities when trying to comply with cabotage which is damaging and increasing costs to Irish exporters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47556/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Provisions in relation to road haulage cabotage are set out in EU Regulation 1072 of 2009, which came into effect on 14 May 2010. Cabotage refers to haulage for hire or reward within a host Member State carried out on a temporary basis by a non-resident operator. The EU Regulation defines the specific limitations of cabotage, that is, when goods carried in the course of an inbound international journey have been delivered, the haulier may with the same vehicle carry out up to 3 cabotage operations within 7 days, after which he must exit the host Member State. Cabotage enforcement is a matter for the authorities in each Member State.

I can appreciate that by introducing a change to previous cabotage provisions that were less prescriptive EU Regulation 1072 of 2009 has affected opportunities for cabotage and in particular there have been concerns raised about the enforcement of these regulation in the United Kingdom. In that regard I have repeatedly raised the concerns of Irish hauliers with my British counterparts, unfortunately to limited effect to date.

It should be emphasised that the cabotage provisions do not in any way affect an Irish operator's entitlement to carry goods between Member States – international haulage remains fully liberalised, and represents the vast bulk of haulage work carried out abroad by Irish hauliers.

I note that in its White Paper on Road Transport 2011 to 2020 the European Commission intends to review current provisions on cabotage. I support the idea of an open market for haulage operations and would hope that cabotage can be further liberalised.

Road Safety

247. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will introduce a derogation to the new HGV height restriction for vehicles transporting bulky agricultural products such as hay and straw; if his attention has been drawn to the financial implications for the transport of such products with the current height restriction; and if he will

make a statement on the matter. [47560/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Statutory Instrument 366 of 2008 - Road Traffic (Construction and Use of Vehicles) (Amendment) Regulations, 2008 sets the maximum height limit of vehicles in this country at 4.65 metres. The derogation was introduced to allow a five-year period within which vehicles operating at heights in excess of the new limits could be withdrawn from use in Ireland or to allow for the necessary height reductions by operators. The derogation expired on 31st October 2013 and I have no proposals to extend it nor to make any exceptions to the scope of the Regulations.

This maximum height limit was arrived at following a public consultation process undertaken in 2005. Following this, it was announced in January 2007 that a limit of 4.65m would be introduced. Originally it was proposed that there be a two year derogation for vehicles registered, licensed or in use prior to the introduction of such a limit. Subsequently, following representations from the haulage industry it was agreed that a five year derogation would apply and this applies to those vehicles registered, licensed or in use prior to 1st November 2008, when Statutory Instrument 366 of 2008 was signed into effect.

Extending this derogation would have the effect of penalising those operators who have adapted their fleet recognising that this derogation was coming to an end, and rewarding those that did not. It is more than six years since the 4.65m limit was announced and the industry has had more than adequate time to accommodate themselves to the new limit.

Road Projects Status

248. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will take into consideration a submission from an organisation (details supplied), in respect of the state of a section of the Ring of Kerry road, on the N70 at Ballybrack, Waterville, County Kerry, when drawing up the 2014 programme for national primary and secondary routes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47562/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The planning, design and implementation of individual national road projects is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2007 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Within its capital budget, the assessment and prioritisation of individual projects is a matter in the first instance for the NRA in accordance with Section 19 of the Roads Act.

Noting the above position, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NRA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Driver Licence Applications

249. **Deputy Michael McCarthy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to concerns raised regarding the introduction of a new appointment system at local offices of the National Drivers Licence Service; his views on a person's experience (details supplied) and the measures he will take to address and resolve the matter. [47572/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The new National Driver Licensing Service is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority (RSA) and

any queries regarding specific applications should be directed to the Authority.

Under the terms of the Road Safety Authority (Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness) Act 2012, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) became the national driver licensing authority as of January this year. Also with effect from 19 January, the new plastic card driving licence was introduced in all EU Member States. Between 19 January and 25 October, local authorities continued to provide customer services relating to driving licences on behalf of the RSA. On 29 October last, the RSA assumed full responsibility for the service. I understand that there were some teething issues with the launch of the new national driver licensing service on Tuesday 29th October, which the RSA informs me have now been resolved.

There has been a high level of demand for the service since it opened. The RSA has advised me that a number of solutions have been put in place to address the earlier difficulties experienced. These include the assignment of additional staff, the roll out of a further information campaign and the deployment of a manual booking system which applicants can avail of.

I understand that the RSA is currently working with the Front Office contractor, SGS (Ireland) Ltd. to develop the online booking system which will be deployed across all of its offices within a month. I have been assured that provision will be made for emergency situations where some capacity will be reserved for customers who need a licence at short notice.

In relation to the specific details of the incident described by your constituent, that is an operational matter for the RSA. I have forwarded it to them for direct reply. If a reply has not been received within ten days, please contact my private office.

Credit Availability

250. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which he has had discussions with the hotel industry with particular focus on the level of indebtedness and the way this might affect the efficient operation of the sector; if any endeavours have been made to identify the degree to which the lending institutions are willing to meet the ongoing or day-to-day credit requirements of the industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47596/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am in regular contact with Hotel Industry representatives and am well aware of the issues and their concerns in these matters. The Government recognises that SMEs are the lifeblood of the economy and will play a vital role in the recovery of employment growth. One of the key priorities of the Programme for Government is to ensure that an adequate pool of credit is available to fund SMEs across all sectors, including the tourism industry.

The Government has imposed SME lending targets on AIB and Bank of Ireland for the years 2011 to 2013. Each bank was required to sanction lending of at least €3 billion in 2011, €3.5 billion in 2012 and €4 billion in 2013 for new or increased credit facilities to SMEs. Both banks have reported that they achieved their 2011 and 2012 targets and the recent Credit Review Office quarterly report commented “both banks are on track to achieve their €4bn loan sanction targets, assuming the pattern of previous years of a strong Q4 performance is repeated.” AIB and Bank of Ireland are expected to lend to viable businesses both for investment and working capital purposes.

I am advised by my colleague the Minister for Finance that the Credit Review Office is available to assist businesses which have been refused credit. The recent CRO report shows that the Credit Review Office upheld the credit appeal in 150 cases or 55% of cases decided.

The upheld appeals have resulted in €18.5m credit being made available to SMEs and farms, protecting 1,521 jobs. This shows that there is a strong prospect of success for SMEs going to the Credit Review Office and I would strongly encourage SMEs refused credit to seek a review by the Office.

The SME State Bodies Group, chaired by the Department of Finance, was established in 2012 to develop key policy initiatives to support SME access to credit and other forms of finance, and to ensure their implementation. Fáilte Ireland, which is among the bodies represented on the Group, promotes the sector-specific needs of the tourism and hotel industry.

The Minister for Finance and his officials continue to engage with the lending institutions and he has met the Boards of each of the banks in which the State has a shareholding three times since the start of this year. At these meetings, he has emphasised the importance of access to credit for SMEs and the need for an adequate flow of finance to be available to viable small businesses in Ireland.

Aviation Promotion

251. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which he has discussed with Aer Lingus and or Ryanair, the future development of air passenger transport, long and short haul, with a view to maintaining a stable and vibrant industry to meet the requirements of air passengers, nationally and internationally, maximising the use of this country as an international air transport hub; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47597/13]

257. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which the respective positions of Ryanair, Aer Lingus and other airlines continue to be monitored with a view to ensuring maximum benefit for passengers to and from this country and keeping in mind the need to observe issues in relation to competition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47604/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 251 and 257 together.

My Department and I meet regularly with Aer Lingus and Ryanair, as well as other airlines to discuss matters relating to aviation.

As an island, air transport connectivity is clearly of vital importance to Ireland for both economic and social reasons. There is a healthy competitive market for air services in and out of the country and Ireland benefits from a wide range of air connections, both short and long haul. New routes are being announced on a regular basis by both Irish and international airlines. Irish airports and Tourism Ireland have attractive incentive and marketing programmes available to help support new services. Maintaining and developing this connectivity is certainly a key objective of national aviation policy.

The new national aviation policy that is currently being developed in my Department will outline the actions to be taken by Government to help sustain and develop the aviation sector, in order to create jobs and support business and tourism. Ireland's two largest airlines, Aer Lingus and Ryanair, are among the 74 stakeholders that made submissions as part of the public consultation process on the policy review that took place earlier this year.

The number and quality of the submissions received is encouraging and demonstrates the strong interest there is in shaping future aviation policy. The submissions are currently being

reviewed and the intention is that a draft National Aviation Policy Statement will be issued before the end of the year, which will provide further opportunity for stakeholder input before the adoption of the new policy document in early 2014.

In relation to maximising the use of this country as an international air transport hub while the potential is not there to develop a hub on the scale of a Heathrow or Schiphol which have large populations in their hinterland and significant international connectivity. However, there have been some recent positive developments. Long haul capacity out of Ireland, particularly transatlantic capacity, has increased significantly this year and a number of new services to the US West coast and Canada will commence next year. These additional routes, together with preclearance facilities and the abolition of the air travel tax should serve to increase the attractiveness of Shannon and Dublin airports as transit hubs.

Sporting Events

252. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he continues to examine and explore the possibility of linking up major sporting events in this country with sister events in other jurisdictions throughout Europe and globally with a view to maximising economic benefit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47599/13]

256. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which he and his Department continue to promote the use of this country to host major international sporting events; the extent to which he continues to engage with sporting organisations in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47603/13]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): I propose to take Questions Nos. 252 and 256 together.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment that event tourism will be prioritised in order to continue to bring major events to Ireland. The hosting of major sports events, both participative and spectator sports, can deliver additional international visits and provide a great showcase for Ireland and the media coverage of sports tourism events helps to put Ireland onto travel itineraries as a holiday destination. In this regard, I look forward to the Giro d'Italia coming to Ireland next year.

I am supportive of the ongoing efforts of the State Tourism Agencies and the National Governing Bodies of Sport to attract international events, subject, of course, to an assessment of the costs/benefits involved in any State financial support.

Tourism Industry

253. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which he continues to have discussions on a regular basis with the various stakeholders in the tourism sector with particular reference to the need to identify problems and or opportunities for the industry in advance with a view to enhanced development in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47600/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am in regular contact with the stakeholders in the tourism sector, both individually and through the various representative bodies, and I am kept advised of issues of concern to the industry directly, through my Department and through the tourism agencies.

For example, the Tourism Policy Review was formally launched by Minister Ring and me on 11th September in Dublin Castle. Over 90 individuals from representative bodies, key stakeholders and academia attended the event which marked the publication of a consultation document, raising a series of questions regarding policy priorities for Irish tourism and inviting everybody with an interest in Irish tourism to respond. The responses to this consultation exercise will then feed into the final policy review and statement. The document has been circulated widely to tourism stakeholders and all Government Departments and is available to download on my Department's website (www.dttas.ie). The closing date for submissions has been extended to 22nd November 2013 and to date some 100 have been received.

The consultation process is also being progressed by means of a series of workshops which are ongoing. This will allow consideration of the views raised and other relevant evidence and analysis before commencing drafting of the new policy in the New Year with a view to finalising it by Easter 2014.

Sport and Recreational Development

254. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which he continues to engage with sporting and recreational organisations throughout the country with a view to the identification of their future proposals for development with particular reference to the need to plan for future events; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47601/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Both myself and Minister of State Ring have ongoing dialogue with the key sport stakeholders on the strategic issues and challenges facing the sector and on the sport policy priorities and actions required for the future development of sport.

Question No. 255 answered with Question No. 232.

Question No. 256 answered with Question No. 252.

Question No. 257 answered with Question No. 251.

Question No. 258 answered with Question No. 230.

Road Projects Expenditure

259. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has seen a copy of the engineers' report carried out by Kerry County Council on the structural condition of Listry Bridge on the R563; if not, if he will request a copy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47608/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from local authorities own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority.

In July last year local authorities were invited to submit applications for consideration for

funding in 2013 under the Specific Improvement Grants Scheme. Kerry County Council applied for funding for ten projects under this grant category but Listry Bridge was not among the Council's applications.

The Specific Improvement Grants Scheme is scheduled to be discontinued from 2014 onward in order to maximise the funding available for repair and strengthening work. In lieu of the Specific Improvement Grant Programme, applications have been sought for minor bridge repair works (which is a subset of the current Specific Grant Programme) for 2014. This is in line with focusing monies on road and bridge maintenance and strengthening. Kerry County Council applied for funding for four projects under this grant category and again Listry Bridge was not among the Council's applications.

It is also important to re-iterate that the role of Exchequer grants for regional and local roads is to supplement Councils like Kerry County Council in their own resources spending in this area. It is open to the Council to fund this project from its own resources.

Haulage Industry Regulation

260. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport with regard to the new height restrictions on lorries if exceptions will be made to accommodate certain sectors that is, including industrial companies here making cranes whose height breaches the height restriction guidelines; if there are to be exceptions if the transportation of fodder will be another of these exemptions as it would be a more common sense approach in dealing with this proposal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47628/13]

261. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport further to the decision to reduce the height that lorries can carry on the roads, if he is aware that this will increase the cost of fodder being provided to farmers, for example, hay, silage and straw, which has to be transported by road; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47633/13]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 260 and 261 together.

Statutory Instrument 366 of 2008 - Road Traffic (Construction and Use of Vehicles) (Amendment) Regulations, 2008 sets the maximum height limit of vehicles in this country at 4.65 metres. The derogation was introduced to allow a five-year period within which vehicles operating at heights in excess of the new limits could be withdrawn from use in Ireland or to allow for the necessary height reductions by operators. The derogation expired on 31st October 2013.

This maximum height limit was decided following a public consultation process undertaken in 2005. Following this, it was announced in January 2007 that a limit of 4.65 m would be introduced. Originally it was proposed that there be a two year derogation for vehicles registered, licensed or in use prior to the introduction of such a limit. Subsequently, following representations from the haulage industry it was agreed that a five year derogation would apply and this applies to those vehicles registered, licensed or in use prior to the 1st November 2008, when Statutory Instrument 366 of 2008 was signed into effect.

Extending this derogation would have the effect of penalising those operators who have adapted their fleet recognising that this derogation was coming to an end, and rewarding those that did not. It is more than six years since the 4.65 m limit was announced and the industry has had ample time to accommodate themselves to the new limit.

Separately, where vehicles above the statutory limit need to be used in exceptional circumstances on the country's road network, the existing regime for abnormal loads will be able to deal with such requests. This is not an alternative to complying with the legislation as it is only meant for genuine exceptions. The introduction of a wide scale permitting regime was deemed inappropriate as it would undermine the 4.65 m height limit.