

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 5, inclusive, answered orally.

Company Law

6. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Finance the checks, protections and processes in place to prevent insider dealing in respect of banks selling loans to third-party financial institutions at prices significantly lower than would otherwise be realisable. [17566/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): A broad range of regulatory principles could apply in circumstances where the assets of a bank were disposed of in inappropriate manner. For instance, there may be breaches of market abuse rules, company law principles, Central Bank rules on fitness and probity and/or the criminal law.

The rules in relation to insider dealing are set out in the Market Abuse (Directive 2003/6/EC) Regulations, 2005 (S.I. 342/2005), Part IV of the Investment Funds, Companies and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 2005, Part V of Companies Act 1990 and the Companies (Amendment) Act 1999. In circumstances where loans take the form of transferable securities traded on a multilateral trading facility or junior market then the rules on insider dealing in the 1990 Act may apply.

Where loans or loan books do not take the form of financial instruments such as transferable securities, the Market Abuse regime would not apply but other legal principles and rules would continue to apply. For example specific and general principles of company, financial services and criminal law would continue to apply.

Directors of any Irish company, including banks, incorporated under the Companies Act, 1963, or the Companies Act, 1990, are required to comply with their fiduciary duties to that company, which include:

- acting in good faith and in the interests of the company as a whole,
- avoiding conflicts of interest,
- a prohibition on making undisclosed profits from their position as directors and must account for any profit which they secretly derive from their position as a director, and
- an obligation to carry out their functions with due care, skill and diligence.

In addition, directors of banks operating in Ireland are required to ensure that they have governance and control arrangements in place that comply with, inter alia, the Central Bank

of Ireland's Corporate Governance Code and the European Banking Authority's Governance Guidelines. The Central Bank of Ireland's Fitness and Probity regime also requires credit institutions to assess the suitability of members of the management body and requires high standards of behaviour of those individuals on an ongoing basis. Banks are expected to have strong controls in their front line businesses, in their risk management and compliance functions and an effective internal audit capability, such that conflicts of interest are managed appropriately and the associated risks are mitigated. These arrangements are assessed through, for example, external audits and are also subject to ongoing supervisory engagement by the Central Bank of Ireland, including through regular inspections.

If directors were to approve the selling of a company's asset at less than market value where that decision is not objectively justifiable, shareholders would have a right of action against the directors concerned for a breach of their fiduciary duty. As things stand, this duty to the company is a common law one, but with the proposed commencement of the Companies Act 2014 on 1 June 2015, section 228 makes this a statutory duty.

Finally, where an action by a director or employee of a Bank constitutes fraud or offence, they are subject to the rigour of criminal law.

Questions Nos. 7 to 11, inclusive, answered orally.

NAMA Operations

12. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Finance his plans for the wind-down of the National Asset Management Agency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17545/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised that the NAMA Chief Executive, in his opening address to the Public Accounts Committee on 18 December 2014, stated that NAMA is aiming to redeem a cumulative 80% (€24 billion) of its senior debt by the end of 2016 and that it hopes that it will have redeemed all of it by the end of 2018. He stated that those targets were predicated on conditions in the Irish market remaining favourable and on NAMA being in a position to retain sufficient specialist staff to enable it to generate the optimal financial return from the realisation of its residual loan portfolio.

The Deputy may be aware that in July 2014 the NAMA Board also undertook to facilitate the timely and coherent delivery of key Grade A office space, retail and residential space within the Dublin Docklands strategic development zone and Dublin's Central Business District and to maximise the delivery of residential housing units in areas of most need.

So while we have increasing visibility regarding the elimination of the State's contingent liability through the accelerated redemption of NAMA's government guaranteed senior notes, it is too early to speculate as what date in the future NAMA will have made sufficient progress on its objectives as to warrant consideration of its dissolution.

Credit Union Regulation

13. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether there is an excessive regulatory burden on credit unions in respect of making loans of up to €1,000 to customers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17544/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The Registrar of Credit Unions at the Central Bank is the independent regulator for credit unions. Within her independent regulatory

discretion, the Registrar acts to support the prudential soundness of individual credit unions, to maintain sector stability and to protect the savings of credit union members.

My role as Minister for Finance is to ensure that the legal framework for credit unions is appropriate for the effective operation and supervision of credit unions.

I have been informed by the Central Bank that while the important role of credit unions within their communities and, of course, that many members have a demand for credit is fully accepted, from a regulatory perspective it is important that credit unions are prudent in how they lend money, particularly as it is the money of the saving members of credit unions that is ultimately lent to borrowing members. Ensuring that those borrowers can repay is paramount in the protection of those savings. There are also EU Regulations in place in relation to Consumer Credit Agreements, the scope of which includes credit agreements where the loan amounts are between €200 and €75,000. Part 2 of these regulations focuses on the obligations to assess creditworthiness of consumers based on information provided in support of a loan. The Central Bank further informs me that it expects credit unions to apply prudent lending standards to the granting of all new loans or top-ups of existing loans and to have systems in place to ensure that such applications are fully assessed to confirm the member's creditworthiness.

The safety of members' savings and the security of the credit union sector as a whole are priorities for this Government and I have, on a number of occasions, highlighted the Government's recognition of the important role of credit unions as a volunteer co-operative movement in this country and also the importance of getting lending going in the economy. However, the issue of lending needs to be constructively considered in order to ensure a viable credit union sector into the future.

Financial Services Sector

14. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance his plans for the expansion of the international banking sector outside of the greater Dublin region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17378/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I should point out that significant numbers, almost 12,000, are employed in international services related roles outside the greater Dublin region in locations such as Kerry, Cork, Donegal, Limerick, Kilkenny, Waterford and Shannon. As part of the implementation of the IFS 2020 strategy for the financial services sector more investment and employment will be located outside the greater Dublin region.

The Government launched IFS 2020 on 11 March 2015 which is the new strategy for Ireland's international financial services sector. The new strategy is an action oriented approach to growing and developing the financial services industry in Ireland. The aim is to improve the level of foreign financial services investment and to encourage the growth of more domestic financial services companies including those providing financial technology services. The new strategy was developed to cope with a changing financial services and technological environment, greater international competition and changing consumer preferences in the delivery of financial services products. The five priority areas identified

- promotion and branding
- improving the competitive environment
- supporting research, innovation and entrepreneurship (particularly Fin Tech)

- exploring the emerging sector opportunities and
- the implementation process

are I believe key to the success of the strategy. Clearly the ultimate point of the strategy is job creation. Working with the IDA and Enterprise Ireland the aim is to create an additional 10,000 jobs in IFS firms over the lifetime of the strategy. I consider this is achievable over the lifetime of IFS 2020. It is expected that those jobs in turn will create a virtuous circle, underlining Ireland's attractiveness to the financial services sector, and contributing to the wider recovery now under way.

Banking Sector

15. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on the recent sale of shares in Permanent TSB and the repayment of the Government's contingency capital notes in the bank; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17573/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The announcement by Permanent TSB (PTSB) that it has successfully completed a capital raise as part of its capital plan is a significant milestone in its recovery which gained momentum recently with the European Commission approval of its Restructuring Plan. PTSB has raised €525 million on new capital and through a series of transactions returned €539 million to the State.

The capital raise was required as a result of PTSB failing the SSM Adverse Stress Test, announced in late 2014. PTSB agreed a Capital Plan with the SSM which required them to raise €525 million of new capital - €400 million equity and €125 million Additional Tier 1.

As part of this transaction the State will recoup €509 million in capital receipts from the sale of shares and the repurchase of the Contingent Capital Notes (CoCos), bringing the total capital receipts to c€1.8 billion since our investment in 2011-2012. As a result of much hard work over 45% of the capital invested by the State will have been repaid before taking account of investment income, fees and our residual shareholding. The CoCos were repurchased at market value - a €10.5 million premium over par value.

As a result of PTSB moving to a main market listing in London and Dublin a minimum 25% free float is required. To enable that free float I was requested by the board of PTSB to sell €98 million or 22 million shares to reduce the State's shareholding to 75%. The move to the main markets in London and Dublin will be positive for PTSB and allows the State additional flexibility and liquidity to manage its sell down in due course.

Existing shareholders will be able to subscribe for new ordinary shares at the same price as was available to new investors in the Placing by way of an Open Offer which is being managed by PTSB.

Changes to the Relationship Framework were required in order to facilitate the migration to the main markets but will not alter the overall relationship between PTSB and the State which has been professional and constructive to date.

I am pleased that we have maintained a 75% shareholding in PTSB on behalf of the taxpayer and that high quality international institutional investors have joined us as shareholders - 83% of investors were from the UK or US. It is also noteworthy that the €125 million AT1 issuance is the first such issuance in Ireland.

While much work remains to be done I am satisfied with the continued progress and in particular the fact that the capital raise was completed without the need for investment from the State highlighting the progress that PTSB has made since 2011.

Mortgage Interest Rates

16. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he has had consultation with the various lenders, with a view to reducing interest rates to borrowers, having regard to the rate at which the lenders are currently borrowing, thereby alleviating the concerns of many borrowers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17516/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): At the outset, I would like to confirm to the Deputy that the lending institutions in Ireland - including those in which the State has a significant shareholding - are independent commercial entities. I, as Minister for Finance, have no statutory role in relation to regulated financial institutions setting interest rates. The mortgage interest rates that financial institutions operating in Ireland charge to customers are determined as a result of a commercial decision by the institutions concerned.

Equally, the Central Bank has no statutory role in the setting of interest rates by regulated entities, apart from the interest rate cap imposed on the credit union sector in accordance with the provisions of the Credit Union Act, 1997 and the requirement to be notified of penalty or surcharge interest imposed in respect of arrears.

Nonetheless, the issue of regulation of interest rates remains a policy area under active review. I discussed the issue of mortgage interest rates with the Governor of the Central Bank on 2 April. As a result of this meeting the Governor is currently reviewing the issue of the standard variable rates charged by the lenders. The Governor should be in a position to present this analysis to me in the coming days. I will then meet the six principal mortgage lenders in order to discuss this issue.

It should also be noted that there have been moves on interest rates. As the Deputy will be aware, on 1 May, AIB Group announced a number of reductions to its mortgage interest rates for owner occupier and buy-to-let mortgages.

A series of reductions over a fixed time frame would be acceptable to me and in that context I welcome AIB's announcement as a good first step. Competition between the banks will be crucial in ensuring that the price that the customers have to pay moves in the right direction.

Income Inequality

17. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he acknowledges, following the recent publication of The Sunday Times rich list, the TASC report, Cherishing All Equally: Economic Inequality in Ireland, and the Credit Suisse report on global wealth, that there is overwhelming evidence of a dramatic concentration and increase in the wealth of the very richest in Irish society; his views on whether a widening gap between rich and poor needs to be remedied with higher taxes on wealth, profits and very high incomes, not simply as a matter of fairness but also because such disparities of wealth represent a serious macroeconomic threat to the economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17567/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am aware of the various reports and analyses referred to by the Deputy in his question.

The TASC report found that market income inequality (i.e. income before taxes and transfers) is relatively high in Ireland and has increased since the recession. However, more importantly, recent data and research from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) respectively, indicate that disposable income inequality over the period 2004-2013 has remained broadly stable. These patterns reflect the efficacy of the Irish tax and social welfare system in reducing market income inequality and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has shown the Irish system to be one of the most effective of all OECD countries in this respect.

The fact that this Government has maintained such a progressive and redistributive tax and social welfare system during one of the most difficult fiscal consolidations in the history of the State demonstrates its commitment to equality and fairness. ESRI research shows that Budgets 2009-2015 had neither a progressive nor a regressive pattern and that losses due to budgetary policy were highest for those in the top ten percent of the income distribution followed by those in the bottom ten percent.

With respect to wealth inequality, comprehensive data on household wealth in Ireland, including assets and liabilities, has been published for the first time by the CSO. Crucially, these data have been collected across the entire eurozone according to a standardised methodology. These data indicate that wealth inequality in Ireland for 2013, as measured by the Gini Coefficient, is lower than the eurozone average. The results also show that wealth is less concentrated at the top of the distribution here than the eurozone average. Central Bank analysis of these data also indicates that while wealth inequality has increased since 2011, it is actually lower than in 2006, the earliest period for which data are available.

I am aware that some recent economic research, including by the OECD, has indicated that there may be a negative relationship between inequality and growth. However, their analysis suggests that this negative relationship did not apply in the case of Ireland. Given this, and the fact that Ireland's income and wealth inequality levels are around the EU and eurozone average, I do not consider Ireland's level of inequality to constitute a macroeconomic threat.

Mortgage Arrears Proposals

18. **Deputy Jim Daly** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to assist struggling mortgage holders who want to retain their home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17380/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The Government has put in place a broad strategy to address the problem of mortgage arrears and family home repossessions. This has included an extensive suite of interventions designed to address the problem including specific Central Bank targets for the banks through the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Targets (MART), the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears (CCMA), extensive recasting of the personal insolvency legislation, the provision of advice through Department of Social Protection-led initiatives and the mortgage to rent scheme which is designed to assist borrowers in an unsustainable mortgage position to remain in their homes through the involvement of social housing agencies.

The CCMA sets out requirements for mortgage lenders dealing with borrowers facing or in mortgage arrears on their primary residence and provides a strong consumer protection framework to ensure that borrowers struggling to keep up mortgage repayments are treated in a fair and transparent manner by their lender, and that long term resolution is sought by lenders with each of their borrowers. The CCMA provides that a lender may only commence legal proceedings for repossession where the lender has made every reasonable effort to agree an alternative repayment arrangement with the borrower or his/her nominated representative, and where the

specific timeframes set out in the CCMA have been adhered to, or where the borrower has been classified as not co-operating.

Where a borrower engages with his lender, a restructure arrangement to address his/her mortgage arrears situation, is agreed in the majority of cases. The Central Bank's most recent quarterly release on Residential Mortgage arrears and Repossessions (Q4 2014) indicates that almost 115,000 restructure arrangements have been put in place.

Where a mortgage in arrears is deemed to be unsustainable by the lender the mortgage to rent scheme, administered by my colleague, Alan Kelly, TD, Minister for Environment, Community and Local Government may be a viable alternative which will keep families in their family home.

The effective management of the mortgage arrears issue is an area that remains under continuous review. More and concerted action can be undertaken by the banks to assist customers in arrears. As the Deputy is aware the Taoiseach has previously announced that the Government is considering a range of options to support the existing framework and to improve the uptake of personal insolvency solutions. Given the importance of the issue, his Department is co-ordinating the response across the various Government Departments and agencies and I anticipate that a detailed announcement will be forthcoming shortly.

Universal Social Charge Application

19. **Deputy Jim Daly** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to reduce the emergency tax known as the universal social charge, which was imposed on working people here in a time of financial crisis, noting that the country's financial position has stabilised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17379/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I would first like to make the point that the Universal Social Charge (USC) was introduced in Budget 2011 to replace two other taxes, namely, the Income Levy and the Health Levy. At the time it was introduced, the expected yield from the USC in its first year, in 2011, was to be equivalent to that raised under the two taxes which it replaced, with an additional estimated yield of €420 million in a full year.

The USC was a necessary measure to widen the tax base, remove poverty traps and maintain revenue to reduce the budget deficit. It is a more sustainable charge than those it replaced and is applied at a low rate on a wide base. It was designed and incorporated in to the Irish taxation system as part of its permanent structure and the revenues collected play a vital part in meeting the many expenditure demands placed on the Exchequer. It is also a fair tax in that income cannot, in general, be sheltered from the charge through the use of tax reliefs. I am cognisant of how unpopular the USC is but given that it raises over €4 billion per annum for the Exchequer, it is difficult to see how it could be abolished without the imposition of additional taxation elsewhere or through equivalent cuts in expenditure.

Notwithstanding the above, the Government has sought to ensure that the impact of the charge on those with the lowest incomes is minimised. In Budget 2012, I increased the threshold at which the charge becomes payable from just over €4,000 to just over €10,000, which removed approximately 330,000 individuals from the scope of USC. A further 87,000 individuals were removed from the scope of the charge in Budget 2015 when I further increased the threshold to just over €12,000, as well as reducing the lower rates of USC and increasing the bands. The Government has indicated that it will continue to adjust the USC in a similar manner to the changes introduced in the last Budget. I would hope to be in a position to be able to

further increase the threshold for USC to remove a further 90,000 individuals from the scope of the charge. However, changes to the income tax and USC will be considered in the round as part of my deliberations for the Budget. Therefore it is not possible to indicate at this stage the precise adjustments that will be made. As the Deputy will be aware, much will depend on the fiscal space available to the Government and the exact position will become clearer as the year progresses.

Mortgage Interest Rates

20. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to encourage competition in the banking sector to drive down variable mortgage interest rates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17381/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The lending institutions in Ireland - including those in which the State has a significant shareholding - are independent commercial entities. I, as Minister for Finance, have no statutory role in relation to regulated financial institutions setting interest rates. This is a commercial decision for the institutions concerned.

Equally, the Central Bank has no statutory role in the setting of interest rates by regulated entities, apart from the interest rate cap imposed on the credit union sector in accordance with the provisions of the Credit Union Act, 1997 and the requirement to be notified of penalty or surcharge interest imposed in respect of arrears.

The Deputy should be aware that the Governor of the Central Bank, Patrick Honohan, in his opening statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform last November stated that in Ireland, as in most advanced economies, it has long been understood that tight administrative control over the rates charged by banks would be counter-productive in ensuring a sufficient flow of properly priced credit on a lasting basis. Such control would strongly discourage new entrants when, in fact, ongoing competition in the banking sector will be crucial in ensuring that the economy is provided with efficient and cost effective banking services.

In this regard, there have been some movements on mortgage interest rates of late by a number of institutions which suggest that the market may be entering a new and more competitive phase.

Furthermore, the Central Bank (Supervision and Enforcement Act) 2013 introduced changes to Section 149 of the Consumer Credit Act 1995 which regulates fees and charges in order to attract new entrants to the Irish banking sector. There is some evidence of improvements in the banking sector with a number of institutions introducing new products and adapting their business model. In the last 12 months there have been a number of new entrants to the Irish mortgage market bringing additional and welcome competition to this sector.

Nonetheless, the issue of regulation of interest rates remains a policy area under active review. I discussed the issue of mortgage interest rates with the Governor of the Central Bank on 2 April. As a result of this meeting the Governor is currently reviewing the issue of the standard variable rates charged by the lenders. The Governor should be in a position to present this analysis to me in the coming days. I will then meet the six principal Mortgage Lenders in order to discuss this issue.

A series of reductions in interest rates over a fixed time frame would be acceptable to me and in that context I welcome AIB's announcement of a reduction in interest rates as a good first step. Competition between the banks will be crucial in ensuring that the price that the custom-

ers have to pay moves in the right direction.

Home Renovation Incentive Scheme

21. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to review the home renovation incentive scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17377/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): As previously outlined to the Deputy in written answers to his parliamentary questions in this matter, the Home Renovation Incentive (HRI) was introduced in Budget 2014 and will run until the end of December this year. The incentive provides 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. In the last Budget I extended the scheme to include rental properties, whose owners are subject to income tax.

The Home Renovation Incentive has been very successful to date with works on just over 19,257 homes notified to the Revenue HRI online system as of 23 April 2015. This represents more than €403 million worth of works involving some 4,869 contractors.

The tax credit is only available to the homeowner and not to children or other individuals who may fund the works. However, the Deputy will be aware that a Housing Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability is available from local authorities. That scheme provides grant aid to applicants to assist in the carrying out of works that are reasonably necessary for the purposes of rendering a house more suitable for the accommodation needs of a person with a disability. The grant can assist with changes and adaptations to a home such as making it wheelchair accessible, extending it to create more space, adding a ground floor bathroom or toilet or installing a stair lift. The grant, which is means tested, can cover up to 95% of the cost of works carried out, which is far more generous than the relief available under the Home Renovation Incentive.

Works which are grant-aided also qualify for the Home Renovation Incentive. Three times the value of the grant is deducted from overall expenditure, with any remainder attracting the tax credit of 13.5%. This is good fiscal practice in that relief is not provided twice for the same expenditure. It is worth noting that the deduction in respect of grant-aided work is not taken into consideration for the purposes of reaching the minimum spend threshold of €4,405, excluding VAT.

As with all tax incentives and reliefs, it will be reviewed in the context of my deliberations for the Budget.

National Debt

22. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Finance the projected cost of debt service on the national debt; the interest and repayments for each year from 2015 to 2020; and the projected increases in public spending for each of these years. [17574/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The most recent forecasts of both National Debt interest and General Government interest expenditure for the period 2015 to 2020 are contained in the draft Stability Programme Update (SPU), published on the 28th of April by my Department. The relevant information is contained in Table A3 in Annex 1 of this publication, which is provided for convenience.

€ million	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
National Debt Interest	7,142	7,194	6,941	7,050	7,008	6,879
General Government Interest	6,861	6,751	6,891	6,951	6,889	6,679

National debt interest is the projected cash interest cost of the National debt. The General Government interest figures are prepared on an ESA10 accrual basis and represent the projected interest cost of the wider General Government measure of debt.

Regarding debt repayments over the period 2015 to 2020, a comprehensive chart was included in the SPU detailing the maturity profile of long-term marketable and official debt as at end March 2015. A summary of the data behind the chart for the period 2015-2020 is shown in the table.

€ million	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Long-term marketable and official debt*	4,868	8,021	6,280	13,118	16,301	22,300

Source: NTMA

Note that these figures are unaudited and include the effect of currency hedging transactions. Rounding can affect totals.

*Long-term marketable & official debt includes Irish Government Bonds (including Amortising Bonds) and EU/IMF & Bilateral facilities. The figures reflect the EFSF maturity extensions agreed in June 2013. EFSM loans are also subject to a seven year extension. It is not expected that Ireland will have to refinance any of its EFSM loans before 2027. However, the revised maturity dates of individual EFSM loans will only be determined as they approach their original maturity dates. The original EFSM maturities of €5 billion in 2015 and €3.9 billion in 2018 are reflected in the table above.

On the subject of public spending for 2015 to 2020, general government expenditure is forecast to increase from €72.3 billion in 2014 to €73.8 billion over the forecast horizon. More specifically, a forecast for gross voted expenditure for each of the specified years is included in table 10 on page 18 of the SPU. It should be noted that the gross current voted expenditure figures include a provision of €300 million per annum for demographic costs beyond 2016. The relevant figures are shown in the table.

€ million	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Gross Voted Current Expenditure	49,715	50,045	50,345	50,645	50,945	51,245
Gross Voted Capital Expenditure	3,670	3,690	3,785	3,785	3,785	3,785

Mortgage Arrears Proposals

23. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance the specific proposed legislative changes to be made to deal with the mortgage crisis, as mentioned in the Spring Economic Statement 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17508/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): As the Deputy is aware, the Government has put in place a broad strategy to address the problem of mortgage arrears and family home repossessions. The primary focus of this strategy is to support those homeowners in diffi-

culty with their mortgage repayments and, insofar as possible, to avoid repossession of the family home. The Central Bank of Ireland's Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears (CCMA) sets out requirements for mortgage lenders dealing with borrowers facing or in mortgage arrears on their primary residence and provides a strong consumer protection framework to ensure that borrowers struggling to keep up mortgage repayments are treated in a fair and transparent manner by their lender, and that long term resolution is sought by lenders with each of their borrowers. Where a borrower engages with his lender, a sustainable restructure arrangement to address his/her mortgage arrears situation is agreed in the majority of cases. The Central Bank's most recent quarterly release on Residential Mortgage arrears and Repossessions (Q4 2014) indicates that almost 115,000 restructure arrangements have been put in place.

A key focus of any forthcoming initiatives from Government will be to ensure that distressed borrowers are fully informed about appropriate supports, how to access them and how they can help. Many borrowers can find solutions through the options offered by the Insolvency Service of Ireland and Government will ensure that the personal insolvency process is as fair and effective as possible and that the objectives as set out in the original Personal Insolvency Act are realised as much as possible. My colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, and her officials are actively preparing amendments to the legislative framework for personal insolvency aimed at enabling Government's objectives in this regard to be met and allowing more people in distressed debt to access the available mechanisms than has been the case to date. Where a mortgage in arrears is deemed to be unsustainable by the lender the mortgage to rent scheme, administered by my colleague, Alan Kelly, TD, Minister for Environment, Community and Local Government may be a viable alternative which will enable families to remain in the family home and his Department are examining the possibilities for more throughput via this mechanism. The effective management of the mortgage arrears issue is an area that remains under continuous review. More and concerted action can be undertaken by the banks to assist customers in arrears. As the Deputy is aware the Taoiseach has previously announced that the Government is considering a range of options to support the existing framework and to improve the uptake of personal insolvency solutions. Given the importance of the issue, his Department is co-ordinating the response across the various Government Departments and agencies and I anticipate that a detailed announcement will be forthcoming shortly.

Tax Agreements

24. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide an update on the preparation for the review by the European Parliament's tax committee; if he will provide an update on the current status of Ireland with regard to the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act, and what this means for Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17376/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The European Parliament has decided to establish a special committee on tax rulings and other measures similar in nature and effect. The European Parliament Special Committee on Tax Rulings (TAXE) has six months in which to complete its work. As part of the parliamentary activities that have been scheduled for this purpose, the coordinators of the political groups in the TAXE Committee decided to conduct fact-finding missions to several Member States. These fact-finding missions are designed to take place in full cooperation with the national authorities, and TAXE members wish to hold constructive and forward-looking dialogues with the relevant bodies. As outlined in our policy documents "Ireland's International Tax Strategy" (2013) and the "Road Map for Ireland's Tax Competitiveness" (2014), Ireland is fully committed to transparency in international tax matters and to that end we will assist the European Parliament in their important work.

Section 891E of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, introduced in Finance Act 2013, provides for the implementation of the agreement between the Governments of Ireland and the United States of America on the operation of the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (FATCA).

The related Financial Accounts Reporting (United States of America) Regulations 2014 came into effect on 1st July 2014. These regulations require financial institutions in the State to make a return of information with regard to accounts held for the benefit of citizens or residents of the United States not later than 30th June 2015. I am further advised that the Revenue Commissioners have agreed protocols with the IRS for the exchange of this information and that the first such exchanges of information will take place in September of this year.

Our participation in FATCA, together with our participation in other programmes for the automatic exchange of financial account information developed by the EU and the OECD, serves to demonstrate Ireland's commitment to openness and transparency in tax matters and to playing our part in combatting tax evasion worldwide. By participating in these exchanges of information the Revenue Commissioners will receive information on financial accounts held abroad by tax residents of this State which will be of value to them in combatting tax evasion.

Tax Code

25. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to abolish the non-domicile regime; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17569/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): Domicile is a common law legal term, rather than a tax concept. Every person must have a domicile, whether domicile of origin or domicile of choice. They can have only one at any given time.

An individual who is resident and domiciled in Ireland is taxable on their worldwide income and gains.

A person who is resident but not domiciled in Ireland is only taxable on their Irish source income and any foreign income which they remit into the state, the so-called remittance basis of taxation. Regarding employment income, the charge to tax extends to all income from an Irish employment and income attributable to the performance of duties of a foreign employment in the State. The income attributable to the performance of the duties of a foreign employment outside the State is chargeable only when remitted to the State. Remittances are effectively amounts which are brought directly or indirectly into the State. (e.g. using foreign income to pay off a foreign loan, where the proceeds of the loan had been used in the State.)

There can be many valid reasons why a person resident in Ireland would not be domiciled here and avail of the remittance basis. However, it is important to ensure that the combined impact of domicile status and the remittance basis do not inappropriately operate in such a way as to avoid taxation in Ireland. Anti-avoidance measures have been introduced over the years for this purpose. E.g.:

1 - Provisions to tackle an abuse whereby a non-domiciled spouse would gift income or the proceeds of a sale to a domiciled spouse, who would then remit the amounts into Ireland avoiding a charge to income tax or CGT as the remittance basis only applies to non-domiciles.

2 - Up to FA 2010 the remittance basis was available to Irish citizens who were not ordinarily resident in the State. From 2010, the remittance basis is only available to non-domiciles.

3 - Up to 31 December 2005, a resident but non-domiciled individual with income from a

non-Irish sourced employment qualified for the remittance basis. Following FA 2006 changes, the portion of that income attributable to the performance of the duties of employment in the State no longer qualifies for the remittance basis.

While all tax policies are continually open to review, it is not customary for the Minister for Finance to comment in advance on issues that are appropriate for consideration in the context of the Budget.

NAMA Transactions

26. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Minister for Finance his plans for making the National Asset Management Agency more accountable, and for eventually winding it down; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17382/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised that the NAMA Chief Executive, in his opening address to the Public Accounts Committee on 18 December 2014, stated that NAMA is aiming to redeem a cumulative 80% (€24 billion) of its senior debt by the end of 2016 and that it hopes that it will have redeemed all of it by the end of 2018. He stated that those targets were predicated on conditions in the Irish market remaining favourable and on NAMA being in a position to retain sufficient specialist staff to enable it to generate the optimal financial return from the realisation of its residual loan portfolio.

The Deputy may be aware that the NAMA Board has also undertaken to facilitate the timely and coherent delivery of key Grade A office space, retail and residential space within the Dublin Docklands strategic development zone and Dublin's Central Business District and to maximise the delivery of residential housing units in areas of most need. Given that these commitments were agreed with NAMA only in July 2014, it is too early to speculate as what date in the future NAMA will have made sufficient progress on its objectives as to warrant consideration of its dissolution.

As regards accountability, it is important to point out that NAMA is already subject to a high level of public accountability compared to other commercial bodies, including commercial bodies in the State sector.

Its Annual Report and Financial Statements are laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. In addition, NAMA is also required to submit to me an Annual Statement by 30 September each year setting out its proposed objectives for the following financial year, the scope of activities to be undertaken, its strategies and policies and its proposed use of resources.

NAMA is also required to report to me on a quarterly basis giving detailed information about its loans, its financing arrangements and its income and expenditure. These reports, which also include other information specified under Section 55 of the NAMA Act, track progress on a quarterly basis. I am obliged to lay such reports before the Oireachtas and I endeavour to do so on a timely basis.

The Chairman and Chief Executive are also accountable to the Committee of Public Accounts (PAC) and other Oireachtas committees and to give evidence to those committees whenever required to do so. Furthermore, there have been numerous Parliamentary Questions addressed to me on NAMA-related issues and the associated replies are on the Oireachtas record.

NAMA's accounts are comprehensively audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General, who has a permanent team of officers based in the Agency with unrestricted access to all its records and files. If there is concern about a specific aspect of NAMA's work, it is within the

power of the Comptroller and Auditor General to scrutinise any aspect of it. The Comptroller and Auditor General has already produced three special reports on NAMA's activities and they have been broadly positive in their assessment of how NAMA is managing its complex business.

Against this backdrop, I do not accept that there is a need to make NAMA more accountable than is already the case.

IBRC Operations

27. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 80 of 26 March 2015 in relation to his Department's inquiries into the sale of Siteserv by Irish Bank Resolution Corporation, the reason he stated this matter was further discussed at a meeting between the former Secretary General of the Department of Finance and the then chief executive officer of the corporation took place in August 2012, when the chief executive officer in question has stated in the public domain that the matter was not discussed at that meeting (details supplied); if he disputes the account provided by the former chief executive officer; if not, if it was his intention to mislead Dáil Éireann in this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17564/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): A record of the briefing note ahead of the former Secretary General of the Department of Finance meeting with the then CEO of IBRC in August 2012 shows that Siteserv was one of a number of topics which was contained in the briefing note.

A further record of an email which outlines outputs from this meeting also exists. The main output relating to this issue was the agreement to the secondment of a senior Department of Finance official to IBRC. (These records have been released under FOI and are available on the Department of Finance website at <http://www.finance.gov.ie/news-centre/press-releases/ibrc-foi-documents>.)

This led to a senior Department of Finance official being announced as the Bank's new Head of Market Solutions on secondment from the Department of Finance, commencing the role on 2 October 2012. Given the banking experience of this person it was decided that he would be seconded to IBRC to explore opportunities for deleveraging with a view to maximising the recovery for the taxpayer. This had the additional benefit of providing greater oversight while supporting the management team.

The responsibilities of the person referred to in the question included:

- Membership of the Bank's Group Executive Committee (GEXCO);
- Membership of the Transaction Review Committee;
- Contribute to the strategic leadership of the Bank;
- Analyse existing investments within the portfolio, critically assess business plans, operations, management, processes, risks, and opportunities;
- Structure/restructure loans/investments from an optimal financial perspective, negotiate the structure and preferred terms;
- Identifying and developing deal opportunities with external investors and financiers that meet the various strategic and financial objectives of the Bank in wind down;

- Build and maintain dialogue with potential investors and counterparties to establish market opportunities and viable transaction options that assist the Bank meeting its wind down objectives;

- Engagement will be across private equity funds, credit opportunity funds, real estate funds and sovereign wealth funds as well as banks and other providers of credit in the European markets;

- Work with asset recovery teams;

- Appoint brokers/advisors in accordance with the Bank's procurement and compliance policy;

- Team management, and;

- Lead the execution of transactions and engage with counter parties while involving internal group functional groups as well as external service providers.

As the Deputy is aware, the former Secretary General of the Department of Finance who attended this meeting no longer works for the Department of Finance. However, given the facts outlined above, it should be very clear to the Deputy that it was not, nor never would be, my intention to mislead Dáil Éireann.

Tax Code

28. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to review capital acquisition tax thresholds in view of rising asset prices, in particular residential property; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17546/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): Capital Acquisitions Tax (CAT) is the overall title for both Gift and Inheritance Tax. The tax is charged on the amount gifted to, or inherited by, the beneficiary of the gift or inheritance.

For the purposes of CAT, the relationship between the person who provides the gift or inheritance (i.e. the disponer) and the person who receives the gift or inheritance (i.e. the beneficiary), determines the maximum life-time tax-free threshold known as the "Group threshold" below which gift or inheritance tax does not arise.

There are, in all, three separate Group thresholds based on the relationship of the beneficiary to the disponer.

The Group A tax free threshold of €225,000, applies where the beneficiary is a child (including adopted child, stepchild and certain foster children) or minor child of a deceased child of the disponer. Parents also fall within this threshold where they take an inheritance of an absolute interest from a child.

The Group B tax free threshold of €30,150, applies where the beneficiary is a brother, sister, a nephew, a niece or lineal ancestor or lineal descendant of the disponer.

The Group C tax free threshold €15,075, applies in all other cases.

Where a person receives gifts or inheritances in excess of their relevant tax free threshold, CAT at a rate of 33% applies on the excess over the tax free threshold. In recent years these thresholds were reduced and the rate has been increased in order to maintain the yield from

capital taxes in the face of falling asset prices and as part of our fiscal consolidation efforts. In addition, taxes on capital are less harmful from an economic perspective than taxes on employment.

I am aware that the property market continues to improve, with positive developments which had been restricted to the Dublin area now manifesting in other areas of the country, though not to the same extent in terms of price rises, and I recognise that this has a bearing on taxation of the inheritance and gifting of property with respect to CAT thresholds. In this light, I will be keeping Capital Acquisitions Tax thresholds and other aspects of the tax under review, particularly in the context of preparations for Budget 2016 and the consequent Finance Bill.

Job Creation Targets

29. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Finance in view of his spring statement announcement of 200,000 net new jobs by 2018, if he has been in contact with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Department for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation to ensure these jobs will not be low paid or low hours; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17570/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): Since the low-point of the crisis experienced in the second half of 2012, some 95,000 jobs have been created to date. The April 2015 Stability Programme Update, on which the Spring Economic Statement is based, projects that relative to this low-point, some 245,000 net new jobs will be created by the end of 2018.

In addition to increases in employment volumes, my Department is forecasting an increase in wages and the number of hours worked per employee over the horizon. Of course, this is the aggregate position there will be sectors that will perform better than average, and those that will be below average trends.

In terms of outlook, over the period to 2018 economy-wide pay per head is projected to increase by an average of just over 2½ per cent per annum. Following a contraction in the number of hours worked over the crisis years, projected hours per worker are also anticipated to increase over the period.

Certainty for employees around their working hours in particular is important from both a stability and financial planning perspective. I welcome the study recently commissioned by the Minister for Business and Employment Mr Ged Nash which will investigate both the prevalence and impact of zero hours and low-hour contracts.

The key objectives of the study are:

- To fill the gap in knowledge that currently exists in terms of hard data on zero-hour and low-hour contracts that is available concerning the prevalence of zero hour and low hour contracts in the Irish economy and the manner of their use.
- To assess the impact of zero hour and low hour contracts on employees, and
- To enable the Government to consider any evidence-based policy recommendations deemed necessary on foot of the study

The study will have a broad scope covering both public and private sectors and will have a particular focus on the retail, hospitality education and health sectors. I look forward to its completion which will allow the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation to make evidence-

based policy recommendations which will be considered on a whole-of-government approach.

I also await the findings of the Low Pay Commission which will report to Government in July and make recommendations on the rate of minimum wage, giving due consideration to “assist as many low-paid workers as is reasonably practicable without creating significant adverse consequences for employment”.

I look forward to actively engaging with my colleagues as part of the above processes.

IBRC Operations

30. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance in accordance with paragraph 13 of the ministerial instructions to the special liquidators, if he will divulge to the original mortgage holder the valuation of the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation’s assets and the value at which that person’s original mortgage was sold to a third party, as the special liquidators are themselves precluded from divulging the valuation of the corporation’s assets other than to the National Asset Management Agency or to the Minister for Finance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17509/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised by the Special Liquidators (SLs) that the valuation of the residential mortgage assets and/or the prices obtained in their sale will not be disclosed as this information is considered commercially sensitive financial information.

It is also important to note that the Department of Finance is not in possession of such information. In order to protect the confidentiality of customer data, the integrity of the sales processes and the liquidation more generally, the Department of Finance and NAMA were not made aware of nor did they receive the independent valuations of the loan assets at either a portfolio or a loan level, nor have they been made aware of the sales prices achieved for any individual mortgage sold as part of the liquidation.

The SLs were appointed over Irish Bank Resolution Corporation Limited (“IBRC”) in February 2013 pursuant to Section 4 of the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation Act, 2013 (IBRC Act). The SLs instructions and obligations provide for the winding up of IBRC in an orderly and efficient manner in the public interest and in order to maximise the return for the creditors of IBRC. The passing of the IBRC Act and the appointment of the SLs was part of the promissory note transaction which yielded significant benefits for the State.

On the appointment of the SLs, I instructed them to arrange for and complete the independent valuation of IBRC’s loan assets by no later than 30 November 2013. In this respect, the SLs appointed PwC as independent advisors to value the residential mortgage portfolio and to provide advice in developing a strategy for the sale of the residential mortgage portfolio which would ensure that maximum value was obtained for all creditors of IBRC. I further instructed the SLs to ensure that the sale of all loan assets was agreed or completed by no later than 31 December 2013 or as soon as practicable thereafter.

Per my instruction, the assets of IBRC could only be sold at a price equal to or in excess of the independent valuations obtained. Should a bid not be received in excess of the independent valuation obtained, the loan asset was to transfer to NAMA at the independent valuation price.

In total there were 11,825 individual residential mortgage customers in IBRC (comprising 12,702 mortgages with a par value of €1.8 billion). Following receipt of legal advice, the SLs corresponded with all residential mortgage holders and provided them with an opportunity to

make written representations on the method of disposal of their loans and the criteria for determining who may bid for loan assets. The SLs reviewed and considered each and every representation. The representations were also considered by PwC in providing their sales strategy advice.

Following the receipt and review of borrower representations and the independent advice provided by PwC, it was decided that the mortgage portfolio (i.e. the Sand portfolio) be subdivided into four portfolio tranches with a view to maximising market interest and return within the timelines set out in the Ministerial Instruction.

The SLs did consider the concept of selling individual mortgages but a number of issues impacted on the decision, including:

- cost;
- timing;
- independent advice received from PwC;
- borrower only bids;
- confidentiality of personal information;
- delivering best results for the creditors including the taxpayer; and
- execution risk.

The valuation of the Sand portfolio completed on 11 November 2013 and the sales process commenced on 14 October 2013

On 1 April 2014, the Special Liquidators announced that 64% of the mortgage portfolio (with a par value of €1.8 billion) had been sold to two buyers, namely Lone Star and Oaktree Capital Management L.P.

Following my instruction in April 2014, NAMA were no longer obliged to purchase the unsold IBRC assets at their independent valuation as previously envisaged due to the fact that the expected proceeds from the sale of the IBRC loan assets was sufficient to fully repay the IBRC debt to NAMA. The SLs therefore devised a further sales process in respect of the unsold loan assets to maximise the return to all remaining creditors of IBRC, including the State. The SLs again corresponded with all those remaining residential mortgage holders whose loan assets were not sold in the first sales process providing them with an opportunity to make written representations on the method of disposal of their loans and the criteria for determining who may bid for loan assets. Consideration was given to these Borrower representations and the SLs responded to these Borrower representations.

Following representations received from borrowers and the independent advice received, the unsold residential mortgage loan assets, which were now known as the Pearl portfolio were split into two tranches. The sale of the Pearl portfolio tranches were contracted prior to 31 December 2014 and completed in February 2015.

IBRC Operations

31. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance in view of the information which has emerged in the public domain recently which demonstrates a severely strained

relationship between his Department and the senior management at the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation in advance of its special liquidation, if he will state that such difficulties were not a contributory factor in the early winding up of the corporation in February 2013; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17571/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): There was a professional working relationship between my Department and senior management of IBRC at all times. Given the issues which the bank was dealing with at the time, this may not have always led to agreement on certain matters between my Department and senior management of IBRC, nor should this be expected. I would expect healthy debate on such matters between the parties involved and expect they would have asked difficult questions of each other during their interactions given the importance of the decisions being made.

We should expect professionals to challenge, debate and sometimes disagree with each other and not shy away from having difficult discussions in pursuing and justifying what they believe to be the best course of action in whatever issue they are addressing.

The decision to liquidate IBRC and exchange the Promissory Notes was taken with the expressed purpose of protecting the taxpayer, to end the exposure of the State and the Central Bank to IBRC, to enable the state to re-establish normalised access to the international debt markets, to resolve the debt of IBRC to the Central Bank, to restore confidence in the banking sector more generally and to provide for the orderly wind down of IBRC which was being supported, at a heavy cost to the State, by the Promissory Notes.

The relationship with the management of IBRC was not a contributory factor, nor the decision making process surrounding the formulation, design and structuring of the Promissory Note transaction and liquidation of IBRC.

Loan Books Purchasers

32. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Finance the steps he has initiated to prevent banks selling loans to third-party institutions for significantly less than the negotiated offers made by debtors. [17565/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The banks are independent commercial entities and the relationship between the banks in which we have a shareholding and the Minister for Finance are defined in the relationship framework. I do not intend intervening in any decisions they may make in relation to how they dispose of loans at present.

I should add that the borrowers whose loans are sold to unregulated entities will be protected by the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Bill 2015 which will require entities dealing with the consumer to be authorised by the Central Bank and subject to its Codes of Conduct. Dealing with the consumer is credit servicing and the definition of credit servicing is broad. Owners of loan books who deal directly with consumers, that is, who are servicing their own loan books, will be regulated. Otherwise they can have the loan book serviced by a regulated credit servicing firm.

The Bill was published in January and second stage of the Bill was taken in the Dáil on 4 February. Since then, my officials have been in contact with the Central Bank and with the Office of the Attorney General to further progress the legislation. The Bill will continue its progress through the legislative process and I look forward to further discussion of the Bill at Committee Stage.

IBRC Operations

33. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on the consultations between his Department and the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation on the sale of corporation's United States of America loan book; if he will report on the loss to the Exchequer from the sale of the loan book; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17572/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I can confirm that there were various discussions between my Department and IBRC in relation to the disposal of IBRC's US loan book and I was kept informed of the progress being made on this matter. The disposal of Anglo's US loan portfolio is a reserved matter which required my consent under the relationship framework which was in place at that time. On 25 August 2011, I gave my consent for the disposal of IBRC's US loan book subject to a number of conditions including the securing of a minimum price, maximising value for the shareholder, that IBRC conduct a fair and transparent process and that IBRC continued to cooperate with the Department of Finance.

It was the fiduciary responsibility of the IBRC Board that the process achieved the objective of maximising value for the shareholder. As part of this responsibility the Board would have evaluated and weighed any loss to IBRC on the sale of an asset against the potential loss from continuing to hold the asset.

I am advised by the Special Liquidators of IBRC that this transaction will form part of the review in which I have directed them to undertake.

Mortgage Arrears Proposals

34. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which an evaluation has been done of the extent of mortgage arrears in respect of family homes; if, in the event of threatened repossessions, cognisance will be taken of those borrowers who continue to make payments to the best of their ability or whose mortgages have fallen into arrears due to health problems, with a view to setting out simple guidelines within which borrowers and lenders will be fairly accommodated without incurring moral hazard, repossession or added interest; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17515/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): As the Deputy is aware, the Government has put in place a broad strategy to address the problem of mortgage arrears and family home repossessions.

This has included an extensive suite of interventions designed to address the problem including specific Central Bank targets for the banks through the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Targets (MART), the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears, extensive recasting of the personal insolvency legislation, the provision of advice through Department of Social Protection-led initiatives and the mortgage to rent scheme which is designed to assist borrowers in an unsustainable mortgage position to remain in their homes through the involvement of social housing agencies.

With respect to the setting of Mortgage Arrears Resolution Targets, I am informed by the Central Bank (CBI) that it set further targets for the six main banks for Quarters 3 and 4 of 2014. The CBI continues to monitor banks' progress regarding MART requirements, most notably through: intensive ongoing supervisory engagement; audits; on-site reviews of operations and compliance with the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears (CCMA); and ongoing monitoring of performance. The CBI has reported that the banks continue to meet or exceed the targets set

for them.

As the Deputy is aware, the key issue is engagement. The completion of affordability assessments is a key step in the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Process. In this regard a lender must examine each case on its individual merits and must base its assessment on the full circumstances of the borrower, including their personal circumstances, level of overall indebtedness, completeness and accuracy of information in their standard financial statement (SFS), their current repayment capacity and previous repayment history. The latest figures demonstrate that some 115,000 mortgages on family homes have been restructured with the vast majority of the borrowers able to adhere to the new arrangements and stay in their homes.

Social Insurance

35. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection the position regarding pay-related social insurance (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17940/15]

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) is paid by employees, their employers and the self-employed for the sole purpose of funding social insurance benefits to provide pensions and other working age benefits to those who have established an entitlement.

Prior to 2011 the health contribution paid by employees was collected along with PRSI. PRSI was separate to the health contribution and was charged at a rate appropriate depending on the category of employment. (For example, private sector employees pay PRSI at 4%, while their employer pays 10.75% or 8.5% depending on the level of earnings.)

The health contribution was an additional charge payable by employees with weekly income in excess of €500, at the rate of 4% on income up to €75,036 and 5% on weekly earnings above €75,036. The health contribution was remitted to the Department of Health. In January 2011 the health contribution was abolished and along with the income levy was replaced into the universal social charge.

The health contribution was separate to and bore no relationship to PRSI other than a shared collection mechanism.

The table sets out the benefits accruing to the various categories of persons paying PRSI according to the class of PRSI contribution paid:

Benefit	Class A	Class J	Class S	Class B	Class C	Class D	Class E	Class H	Class P
Adoptive Benefit	Accruing		Accruing				Accruing	Accruing	
Carer's Benefit	Accruing			Accruing	Accruing	Accruing	Accruing	**	
Illness Benefit	Accruing						Accruing	Accruing	*
Health and Safety Benefit	Accruing						Accruing	Accruing	
Invalidity Pension	Accruing						Accruing	Accruing	
Maternity Benefit	Accruing		Accruing				Accruing	Accruing	

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Benefit	Class A	Class J	Class S	Class B	Class C	Class D	Class E	Class H	Class P
Occupational Injuries Benefit	Accruing	Accruing				Accruing			
State Pension (Contributory)	Accruing		Accruing				Accruing	Accruing	
Guardian's Payment	Accruing		Accruing	Accruing	Accruing	Accruing	Accruing	Accruing	
Treatment Benefit	Accruing						Accruing	**	Accruing
Jobseeker's Benefit	Accruing							Accruing	*
Widow's, Widower's or Surviving Civil Partner's Pension (Contributory)	Accruing		Accruing	Accruing	Accruing	Accruing	Accruing	**	

* Class P - Limited Benefits.

** Class H - only these benefits are paid during service.

Optical, dental and audiological benefits are available under the Department's treatment benefit scheme. Optical and dental benefits currently offer free examinations, while audiological benefit pays part of the cost of the purchase of hearing aids.

Free Travel Scheme

36. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection her plans to ensure that any bus company awarded a public service obligation route will continue to accommodate the free travel pass scheme. [17972/15]

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The free travel scheme permits free travel on most CIE public transport services, Luas and a range of services offered by some 80 private operators in various parts of the country for those eligible under the scheme. There are currently in excess of 810,000 customers with direct eligibility with an annual allocation of €77 million.

As regards routes with Public Service Obligation funding that go out to tender, including routes previously operated by CIÉ, it is my intention that private operators will be able to apply to participate in the free travel scheme.

Bereavement Grant

37. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection her plans to reintroduce the bereavement grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18029/15]

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The overall concern in recent Budgets has been to protect primary social welfare rates. Abolishing the bereavement grant provided an annual saving of €22 million. This allowed the Department to protect other more fundamental social welfare payments such as the State pension. Accordingly, I have no

plans to reinstate the bereavement grant.

There are a range of supports available for people following bereavement which provide more significant support than the grant. These include a weekly-paid widow's, widower's or surviving civil partner's (contributory and non-contributory) pension based on contributions or a means test, and a once-off widowed or surviving civil partner grant of €6,000 where there is a dependent child. A number of social welfare payments, including State pension and carer's allowance, continue in payment for six weeks following a death. Guardian payments are available where someone is looking after an orphaned child. A special funeral grant of €850 is paid where a person dies because of an accident at work or occupational disease.

Under the supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme, the Department of Social Protection may make a single exceptional needs payment (ENP) to help meet essential, once-off and unforeseen expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. An application can be made under the ENP scheme for assistance with funeral and burial expenses. The assistance is toward the costs of the necessary basic requirements for a dignified funeral. However, there is no automatic entitlement to such a payment. An ENP is a means tested payment payable at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme, taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the individual applicant and that of the deceased person including any savings, property, insurance policies, etc. that would render the applicant or anybody else liable for the burial costs. The Department official will also consider if a bereavement grant is available from any other source including former employer, credit union or trade union.

Disability Allowance Payments

38. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection the reason a disability allowance payment has ceased in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Longford without any prior notice or warning; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17920/15]

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The disability allowance payment of the person in question has been re-instated with effect from 29 April 2015. First payment will be on 8 May 2015 and includes arrears due.

Carer's Allowance Appeals

39. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will receive a decision regarding an application for a carer's allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17922/15]

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 17th December 2014. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Social Protection. These papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 07th April 2015 and the case will be referred to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on documentary evidence presented or, if required, hold an oral hearing.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Pro-

tection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

Carer's Allowance Appeals

40. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will receive a decision regarding the backdating of an application for a carer's allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17923/15]

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I confirm that the department received an application for carer's allowance from the person in question on the 24th July 2013. The person in question was refused carer's allowance on the grounds that the care recipient is not so disabled as to require full time care and attention as prescribed in regulations. The person in question was notified on the 21st of September 2013 of this decision, the reasons for it and of his right of review and appeal. The person concerned appealed this decision and the case was submitted to the Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) for determination. An Appeals Officer (AO), having fully considered all of the available evidence, disallowed the appeal of the person concerned. The person concerned was notified on the 11th March 2014 of the AO's decision and the reasons for the disallowance.

The SWAO subsequently recalled the file for review. Following this review the appeal was partially allowed by an AO with effect from 11th of December 2014 only. The SWAO wrote to the person concerned on the 11th of January 2015 outlining the revised position.

The file has again been recalled by the SWAO and is currently with them for further consideration.

One-Parent Family Payment Appeals

41. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection the procedure to be followed in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare to reinstate a one-parent family payment or other appropriate payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17925/15]

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The person concerned was requested to submit written confirmation of her current address to Maynooth Branch Office. On receipt of the requested documentation, her claim will be reviewed and she will be advised of the outcome as soon as possible.

Question No. 42 withdrawn.

Job Initiatives

43. **Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection her plans to reconsider the administrative rule in respect of the JobBridge scheme, which says that where an intern falls ill for a period of more than ten days, the internship must be terminated and cannot be reinstated on the intern's recovery from illness; if she will reconsider this rule in the context of equality legislation under the grounds of disability; her views that this rule is not in keeping with the principles of equality; if she will consider changing the rule to allow an employer to suspend the internship until such time as the intern recovers; and

if she will make a statement on the matter. [17990/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Kevin Humphreys): The limits on sick leave for JobBridge interns were designed having regard to the limited duration of the internship and is considered necessary to safeguard the integrity of the scheme.

The condition applies to all interns regardless of background or circumstances.

I have no immediate plans to change the terms and conditions of the scheme in that regard pending the evaluation of the scheme later this year.

One-Parent Family Payment Eligibility

44. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection if recipients of one-parent family payments who are in year three of a four-year degree course may continue to receive the higher education maintenance grant and their back to education payments when switched to the back to education allowance by her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18016/15]

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection(Deputy Joan Burton): The reforms to the one-parent family payment aim to reduce long-term social welfare dependency among lone parents by providing them with access the Department's range of education, training, and employment programmes, with a view to developing their skills set and assisting them into sustainable employment, whilst simultaneously acknowledging their specific caring responsibilities.

The Department remains committed to supporting lone parents who wish to pursue education and training. All of the 29,400 customers affected by the one-parent family payment reforms in July 2015, who are in education, will be able to remain on one-parent family payment until they complete their course of education. These customers will not be required to switch to the back to education allowance. If they are in receipt of a SUSI grant, they can continue to receive both the maintenance and tuition portion of the SUSI grant, subject to the normal conditions of the grant. The maintenance portion of the grant will not be assessed as means for their one-parent family payment. Once their course ends, they will transition to either the jobseeker's transitional payment or the jobseeker's allowance, whichever is appropriate.

For customers who lose entitlement to one-parent family payment from July 2015 onwards their youngest child will be 7 years of age. These customers can transition to the jobseeker's transitional payment which is payable until their youngest child reaches 14 years of age. This allows these customers up to 7 years to complete their course. If they are in receipt of a SUSI grant they can maintain grant. In situations like this, the maintenance portion of the SUSI grant will be disregarded for means purposes on the jobseeker's transitional payment.

Question No. 45 withdrawn.

JobsPlus Scheme

46. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection the current number of claimants and jobs supported under the JobsPlus scheme; and the associated cost. [18056/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Kevin Humphreys): JobsPlus provides a direct monthly financial incentive to employers who recruit employees from the Live Register and those transitioning into employment. It provides employers with two levels of payment - €7,500 or €10,000 - over two years provided the employment is maintained.

The Department made payments of just over €1.793m in April 2015 to 3,437 employers in respect of 4,670 employees. A total of €19.505m has been expended to date on the initiative since it was launched in June 2013. Just over 60% of jobseekers who have secured employment with the support of JobsPlus were on the live register for over 24 months at the time of recruitment.

Tax Code

47. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding tax liabilities for landlord property owners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17984/15]

48. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the private rental sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17985/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 47 and 48 together.

The Deputy's questions relate to the tax treatment of landlords. I would highlight that income tax is charged under Schedule D of the Taxes Consolidation Act (TCA) 1997 in respect of a number of sources of income, including rent received by landlords (both individuals and companies) from property in the State.

In the case of rental activity, taxable income is the gross rent as reduced by a limited number of specified deductions as set out in section 97 (2) TCA 1997. The main deductible expenses are:

- any rent payable by the landlord in the case of a sub-lease;
- the cost to the landlord of any goods provided or services rendered to a tenant;
- the cost of maintenance, repairs, insurance and management of the property;
- the interest paid on borrowed money used to purchase, improve or repair the property (which, in the case of residential property, is restricted to 75% of the interest and is subject to compliance with PRTB registration requirements for all tenancies that existed in relation to the property in the relevant year); and
- payment of local authority rates.

In addition, wear and tear capital allowances are available in respect of the capital expenditure incurred on fixtures and fittings provided by a landlord for the purposes of furnishing rented residential accommodation. These allowances are granted at the rate of 12.5% per annum of the actual cost of the fixtures and fittings over a period of 8 years.

The effect of the deduction of allowable expenses from gross rent means that the amount of taxable rental income will often be substantially lower than the gross rent, and could, depending on individual circumstances, be nil.

The Government is monitoring the rental market closely and the overriding objective in relation to rents is to achieve stability and sustainability in the market for the benefit of tenants, landlords and society as a whole. Housing policy is a matter for the Department of Environment, and my officials have been in contact with officials in that department. Any tax proposals would be considered by the Government as part of the annual Budget and Finance Bill process.

Banking Sector

49. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance when he will meet the main lenders; and if he will direct those in which he is the shareholder to reduce their standard variable rate interest rates and offer realistic solutions to families struggling with mortgage arrears that involve maintaining the family home. [17767/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The lending institutions in Ireland - including those in which the State has a significant shareholding - are independent commercial entities. I, as Minister for Finance, have no statutory role in relation to regulated financial institutions setting interest rates. This is a commercial matter for the institutions concerned.

Equally, the Central Bank has no statutory role in the setting of interest rates by regulated entities, apart from the interest rate cap imposed on the credit union sector in accordance with the provisions of the Credit Union Act, 1997 and the requirement to be notified of penalty or surcharge interest imposed in respect of arrears.

Nonetheless, the issue of regulation of interest rates remains a policy area under active review. I discussed the issue of mortgage interest rates with the Governor of the Central Bank on 2 April. As a result, the Governor is currently reviewing the issue of the standard variable rates charged by the lenders and should be in a position to present this analysis to me in the next 10 days or so. I will then meet the six principal mortgage lenders in order to discuss this issue.

In addition, there have been moves on interest rates. As the Deputy will be aware, on 1 May AIB Group announced a number of reductions to its mortgage interest rates for owner occupier and buy-to-let mortgages.

A series of reductions over a fixed time frame would be acceptable to me and in that context I welcome AIB's announcement as a good first step.

The effective management of the mortgage arrears issue is an area that remains under continuous review. More and concerted action can be undertaken by the banks to assist customers in arrears. As the Deputy is aware the Taoiseach has previously announced that the Government is considering a range of options to support the existing framework and to improve the uptake of personal insolvency solutions. Given the importance of the issue, his Department is co-ordinating the response across the various Government Departments and agencies and I anticipate that a detailed announcement will be forthcoming shortly.

Pension Provisions

50. **Deputy Jerry Buttimer** asked the Minister for Finance the reason there was a 4% annual withdrawal limit applied to approved minimum retirement funds; if there is flexibility in this restriction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17903/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): Finance Act 2014 introduced changes to allow owners of approved minimum retirement funds (AMRFs) to draw-down up to 4% of

the assets of such funds on one occasion in each year instead of the facility to draw-down the accrued income and gains of such funds, as had applied prior to the changes.

I should explain by way of background, that under the flexible options at retirement arrangements (the so-called “ARF option”), where an individual in a Defined Contribution pension savings arrangement is under age 75 at the time of exercising the option and does not meet the guaranteed pension income requirement of €12,700 per annum, that individual must place a maximum “set aside” amount of €63,500 (or the remainder of the pension funds if less than €63,500 after taking the retirement lump sum) in an AMRF or purchase an annuity with those funds.

Any amount of remaining pension funds in excess of €63,500 can be invested in an ARF with access to those funds at the owner’s discretion (subject to tax, at the marginal rate and having regard to the imputed distribution requirements).

The purpose of the AMRF is to ensure that an individual without the minimum guaranteed pension income for life has a pension “nest-egg” to provide for the latter years of his/her retirement. Up to Finance Act 2014, the capital invested in an AMRF could not be accessed until the AMRF owner reached age 75 (or meets the guaranteed pension income requirement before then) at which point the AMRF becomes an ARF with unrestricted access to the funds, subject to taxation. While the capital sum in an AMRF could not be accessed, as set out, any income, profits or gains accrued from the investment of the capital could, up to now, be withdrawn by the AMRF owner, subject to tax at the marginal rate.

I decided to change the arrangements for AMRFs so as to allow AMRF owners voluntary, tax-liable access to a maximum of 4% of their AMRF assets each year up to the point at which the AMRF becomes an ARF. This change provides AMRF owners with access to a definitive and certain level of income from their AMRF rather than the uncertain level of income which access to the accrued income, profits and gains in the AMRF provided.

Under the previous access arrangements for AMRFs, the extent of any income, profit or gains would depend on the performance of the investment options taken and could, therefore, be highly volatile with the possibility of little or no gains accruing in certain years. In addition, the scale of the capital allowed for in an AMRF, at €63,500, would not always permit for investment returns of any significant scale to be made using a prudent investment policy.

The change allowing access to a specified percentage of the capital in an AMRF is primarily aimed at those individuals whose AMRF constitutes a significant part of their retirement funds and who, while not wishing to purchase a pension annuity with those funds, may require access to a portion of these funds to provide a more certain form of supplementary pension income prior to reaching age 75. This facility also ensures that an individual will have some remaining funds in the AMRF at age 75 to provide for their remaining years, assuming the individual has not purchased a pension annuity in the meantime.

Individuals whose AMRF represents a less significant part of their retirement funds and whose circumstances would allow for greater investment risk and, therefore, potentially greater investment returns will be limited to the 4% level of asset draw down. However, this draw down will also be available to them for periods when their AMRF investments make losses or returns of less than 4% of the value of their AMRF assets and where, under the previous arrangement, they would not have been able to make a draw down or a draw down of a lesser value than will now be permitted. I consider that the change will be to the benefit of AMRF owners, generally, over the medium to longer term and I have no plans to reverse it.

Mortgage Resolution Processes

51. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide, in tabular form, by county, figures showing the exact numbers of persons who are currently experiencing the problem of mortgage arrears and family home repossession. [17915/15]

52. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide figures, in tabular form, by county, for those who have availed of Government-led interventions designed to address the mortgage crisis, including the Central Bank of Ireland targets for the banks through the mortgage arrears resolution targets, the mortgage-to-rent scheme and the recasting of personal insolvency legislation, for the period January to December 2014. [17916/15]

53. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide figures, in tabular form, by county, for those who have availed of Government-led interventions designed to address the mortgage crisis, including the Central Bank of Ireland targets for the banks through the mortgage arrears resolution targets, the mortgage-to-rent scheme and the recasting of personal insolvency legislation, for the period January to May 2015. [17917/15]

54. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Finance if he will commit to a specific date to address the issue of the mortgage crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17918/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 51 to 54, inclusive, together.

With regard to the data requested by the Deputy, I am informed by the Central Bank of Ireland that the Residential Mortgage Arrears and Repossession Statistics are published quarterly. These statistics are collected from a large number of reporting institutions and are designed to capture all mortgage loans secured on properties located in the Republic of Ireland. The data is provided on a national level only and no regional breakdown is available. It is not, therefore, possible to provide the requested county level mortgage arrears and family home repossessions breakdown. The latest Central Bank publication was for end-Q4 2014 and is available here:

<http://www.centralbank.ie/polstats/stats/mortgagearrears/Pages/releases.aspx>.

In respect of the request regarding those who have availed of the recast personal insolvency legislation, this is an issue which comes under the responsibility of the Minister for Justice & Equality, Frances Fitzgerald, TD. However, I would refer the Deputy to the Insolvency Service of Ireland's most recent Statistical update for Quarter 1 2015 at *http://www.isi.gov.ie/en/ISI/Press_Release_14_4_15.pdf/Files/Press_Release_14_4_15.pdf*.

My own Department's monthly Mortgage Arrears and Restructures publication also collects data on a national level only. The most recent publication, with data up to February 2015, shows that for the six main banks total PDH mortgage accounts in arrears stood at 84,717, a decline of over 3,000 accounts compared to the January figure. The number of accounts in arrears of more than 90 days continued to fall and stood at 59,138 accounts and total mortgage accounts that were restructured stood at 106,402 accounts for the same period. The Deputy may view the full publication at the following link - *<http://www.finance.gov.ie/sites/default/files/Department%20of%20Finance%20-%20Mortgage%20Restructures%20Data%20-%20end%20Feb%202015.pdf>*.

As the Deputy will be aware, responsibility for the administration of the Mortgage-to-rent(MTR) scheme comes under the responsibility of the Minister for the Environment, Community & Local Government and that Department has provided me with county-level data on

the status of all MTR cases processed to date. The data is contained in the table.

The Deputy will also be aware that responsibility for the administration of the Courts Service, which deals with repossession cases, rests with my colleague, Frances Fitzgerald TD, Minister for Justice & Equality. The Courts Service Quarter 1 2015 data for family home repossessions in the Circuit Court was released yesterday. A table showing possession orders granted by county is also set out.

Local Authority	Total	Active	Borrower Consent Required	Complete	Sale Not Agreed	Ineligible	Terminated
Carlow County Council	53	11	0	4	1	5	32
Cavan County Council	73	14	1	1	0	16	41
Clare County Council	54	13	2	2	2	8	27
Cork City Council	44	12	0	4	2	1	25
Cork County Council	158	29	9	3	0	32	85
Donegal County Council	49	0	1	0	0	16	32
Dublin City Council	257	67	6	15	3	22	144
Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown	19	1	1	1	2	6	8
Fingal County Council	193	43	9	5	2	15	119
Galway City Council	13	3	2	0	0	1	7
Galway County Council	73	9	2	1	1	21	39
Kerry County Council	47	8	3	1	2	7	26
Kildare County Council	183	42	15	7	2	17	100
Kilkenny County Council	61	12	3	3	2	13	28
Laois County Council	81	19	4	1	2	14	41

Local Authority	Total	Active	Borrower Consent Required	Complete	Sale Not Agreed	Ineligible	Terminated
Leitrim County Council	14	1	0	1	0	4	8
Limerick City and County C	113	21	4	4	1	19	64
Longford County Council	30	6	1	0	0	8	15
Louth County Council	147	38	2	10	3	15	79
Mayo County Council	42	1	0	0	0	10	31
Meath County Council	250	53	17	7	6	25	142
Monaghan Town Council	35	8	0	0	0	11	19
North Tipperary County Co	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Offaly County Council	94	21	5	2	0	13	53
Roscommon County Council	32	3	1	0	0	6	22
Sligo County Council	18	1	0	0	0	4	13
South Dublin County Council	191	44	6	6	3	18	114
South Tipperary County Council	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tipperary County Council	140	28	4	3	2	21	82
Waterford County Council	7	7	0	0	0	0	0
Local Authority	Total	Active	Borrower Consent Required	Complete	Sale Not Agreed	Ineligible	Terminated
Westmeath County Council	73	13	5	2	0	13	40

Questions - Written Answers

Local Authority	Total	Active	Borrower Consent Required	Complete	Sale Not Agreed	Ineligible	Terminated
Wexford County Council	105	14	3	1	1	14	72
Wicklow County Council	86	16	3	3	1	8	55
Total	2835	590	114	93	39	398	1601

Circuit Court Possession Order Stats for Jan 2015- Mar 2015

Civil Bills Granted

County	Primary Home	By to let	Other Unknown	Total Orders Granted
Carlow	2	3	0	5
Cavan	3	3	3	9
Clare	6	3	0	9
Cork	57	3	15	75
Donegal	29	1	2	32
Dublin	63	19	18	100
Galway	12	1	1	14
Kerry	11	2	3	16
Kildare	8	12	0	20
Kilkenny	7	4	3	14
Laois	35	4	0	39
Leitrim	3	0	3	6
Limerick	11	1	3	15
Longford	3	5	1	9
Louth	18	6	2	26
Mayo	11	7	1	19
Meath	12	0	15	27
Monaghan	4	1	1	6
Offaly	17	3	1	21
Roscommon	16	4	5	25
Sligo	0	1	0	1
Tipperary	17	5	0	22
Waterford	13	0	4	17
Westmeath	6	5	1	12
Wexford	10	3	23	36
Wicklow	9	1	1	11
Total	383	97	106	586

Disabled Drivers Grant Appeals

55. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if a person (details supplied)

in County Kerry will be granted a disabled driver's grant for vehicle registration tax in respect of a car the person has just purchased; if the person's appeal has been reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17958/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The Deputy will be aware of the legal provisions governing the Drivers & Passengers with Disabilities Scheme. As I informed the Deputy in my written answer to him on 4 March 2015, the appeal lodged by the person concerned under Section 145 of the Finance Act 2001 was finalised on 13th February 2015 and the initial decision to refuse the tax relief was upheld.

I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that the person concerned subsequently lodged a further appeal under Section 146 of the Finance Act 2001 whereby his case would be heard by the Appeal Commissioners. That appeal will be listed for hearing before the Appeal Commissioners at the earliest possible date. Finalisation of this matter must await the outcome of that appeal.

Insurance Coverage

56. **Deputy Eric Byrne** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide an explanation of the way an insurance company can suddenly deem an area to be a flood area without notice, and subsequently refuse to make home insurance cover available; the way the said insurance company can also refuse to provide cover for home contents, as well as risks including fire, theft, and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17983/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The provision of flood cover is a commercial matter for insurance companies, which is based on an assessment of the risks they are accepting and the need to make adequate provisioning to meet these risks. As a matter of course, insurance companies carry out reviews of the risks against which they are prepared to insure and sometimes make decisions to discontinue certain types of cover which they consider high risk. Insurance Ireland has indicated that 98% of policyholders have household insurance which includes flood cover.

In order to help those who have been affected by flooding, Government policy aims to address the underlying problem through appropriate remedial works where this is economically feasible. The Office of Public Works is committed to alleviating the impact of flooding through the provision of defences as well as a comprehensive assessment of flood risk throughout the country and development of flood risk management plans for the areas most at risk under the National Catchment Flood Risk Assessment & Management (CFRAM) Programme. This commitment is underpinned by a significant capital works investment programme on flood relief measures. Works are completed on a prioritised basis. Once these works are completed the availability of flood insurance in affected areas would be expected to increase.

The OPW and Insurance Ireland have agreed a Memorandum of Understanding on a sustainable system of information sharing in relation to completed flood alleviation schemes. The outcome of this arrangement, which came into effect in June 2014, is that the insurance industry will have a much greater level of information and understanding of the extent of the protection provided by completed OPW flood defence works and will therefore be in a position to reflect this in assessing the provision of flood insurance to householders in areas where works have been completed. The arrangements set out in the Memorandum represent an ongoing process which, over time, should lead to an improvement in the availability of flood insurance cover.

The OPW and the Department of Finance will continue contact with Insurance Ireland to

review the operation of the Memorandum of Understanding.

In cases where individuals are experiencing difficulty in obtaining flood insurance and believe that they are being treated unfairly it is open to them to contact Insurance Ireland which operates a free Insurance Information Service for those who have queries, complaints or difficulties in relation to insurance. Their service can be contacted at (01) 6761914 or by email at info@insuranceireland.eu

Pension Levy

57. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Finance if he will reduce the figure taken by the controversial pension levy, which was imposed on pension schemes of persons who are saving for a rainy day, and was designed as a fund for job creation, which he promised would be ended by December 2014 and then again at the end of 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17989/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The pension fund levy was introduced in 2011 to fund the Jobs Initiative, which has been very successful in both helping to create and to maintain employment in this economy. The levy applied at a rate of 0.6% for the years 2011 to 2014. An additional levy of 0.15% applied for 2014, bringing the aggregate to 0.75% in that year; the rate of 0.15% applies for this year. In accordance with the provisions in section 125B of the Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999, the stamp duty levy on pension fund assets will end after 2015.

Tax Exemptions

58. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance the reason persons who are involved with a case in a family court cannot claim money back on the legal fees spent, but if it was a criminal case, the money could be claimed back; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18034/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that there is no provision in tax law under which an individual can claim a tax deduction in respect of legal fees incurred in family law or criminal cases.

For the sake of completeness, I wish to inform you that, in certain circumstances, Revenue will not seek to impose a tax charge where an employer pays legal fees on behalf of a director or employee in connection with:

- (a) an investigation or disciplinary procedure instigated by the employer, or
- (b) an action taken by the director or employee seeking compensation for loss of office or employment or, for example, for breaches of employment law by the employer.

The Deputy's question may relate to the availability of legal aid, which is primarily a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality.

Fuel Laundering

59. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on correspon-

dence (details supplied) regarding return of oil movements returns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18035/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that they have instituted a comprehensive strategy to tackle fuel laundering, through enhanced supply chain controls, the acquisition of a more effective fuel marker and continued robust enforcement action. The supply chain controls are designed to make it difficult for fuel criminals to source marked fuel for laundering and to get laundered product onto the market. Under these controls, all mineral oil traders and each premises or place used by them, must be licensed by Revenue. A licensed mineral oil trader is obliged to make a monthly return (the ROM1) to Revenue of all fuel transactions at the premises or place licensed and this data is analyzed by Revenue to identify suspicious patterns and anomalies in the supply chain. To allow effective and timely analysis of the large volumes of data contained in the returns, the ROM1 must be submitted electronically, in a format specified by Revenue.

The Commissioners inform me that, in exceptional cases, a licensed mineral oil trader may apply to them for approval to submit his or her ROM1 return in paper format. These applications are determined on the basis of whether the trader can show that he or she could not reasonably be expected to have the capacity to make the return by electronic means. The trader has the right to appeal to the Appeal Commissioners against a refusal by Revenue to make an exception in any particular case.

Mortgage Arrears Proposals

60. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if it is expected to introduce guidelines to encourage lending institutions intent on family home repossession to observe the need to accommodate borrowers by way of restructuring where family illness or circumstances outside their control has affected their ability to make full payment, and particularly where borrowers have consistently been making payments to the best of their ability, notwithstanding the lenders' insistence with current criteria, in view of the fact that the lending institutions originally granted the facility; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18036/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): As the Deputy is aware, the Government has put in place a broad strategy to address the problem of mortgage arrears and family home repossessions. A central pillar of this strategy in ensuring fair treatment of borrowers in arrears is the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears (CCMA). The Code was first published in 2009 and has been updated on a number of occasions since. The CCMA sought to deliver on the following established principles:

1. Ensure the appropriate resolution of each borrower's arrears situation;
2. Ensure that lenders deal with borrowers in a fair and transparent manner;
3. Support and facilitate meaningful engagement between lenders and borrowers; and
4. Ensure borrower awareness of the benefits of cooperating with their lender and the consequences of not cooperating.

I am informed by the Central Bank that the CCMA applies to all regulated mortgage lenders operating in the State when dealing with borrowers facing or in mortgage arrears on their primary residence, including any mortgage lending activities outsourced by these lenders.

The CCMA provides a strong consumer protection framework to ensure that borrowers

struggling to keep up mortgage repayments are treated in a fair and transparent manner by their lender, and that long-term resolution is sought by lenders with each of their borrowers. All cases must be handled sympathetically and positively by the lender, with the objective at all times of assisting the borrower to meet his/her mortgage obligations. A lender may only commence legal proceedings for repossession where it has made every reasonable effort under the Code to agree an alternative repayment arrangement with the borrower or his/her nominated representative and the specific timeframes set out in the Code have been adhered to or the borrower has been classified as not co-operating.

Where a borrower engages with his lender with a view to putting in place a restructure arrangement to address his/her mortgage arrears situation, repossession of the family home should only be considered as a last resort. The Central Bank's most recent quarterly release on Residential Mortgage arrears and Repossessions (Q4 2014) indicates that almost 115,000 restructure arrangements have been put in place up to the end of December and of these almost 85% were deemed to be meeting the terms of their arrangement. This shows that active engagement can deliver positive results and in the majority of cases will enable a borrower in mortgage distress to remain in his/her family home.

Many borrowers can also find solutions through the options offered by the Insolvency Service of Ireland and Government will ensure that the personal insolvency process is as fair and effective as possible and that the objectives as set out in the original Personal Insolvency Act are realised as much as possible. My colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, and her officials are actively preparing amendments to the legislative framework for personal insolvency aimed at enabling Government's objectives in this regard to be met and allowing more people in distressed debt to access the available mechanisms than has been the case to date.

The effective management of mortgage arrears is, however, an area that remains under continuous review. More and concerted action can be undertaken by the banks to assist customers in arrears and, as the Taoiseach has previously announced, the Government is considering a range of options to support the existing framework and to improve the update of personal insolvency solutions.

Economic Competitiveness

61. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which this economy remains competitive, as compared with other eurozone and non-eurozone European Union member states; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18037/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): Substantial progress has been made in improving Ireland's competitiveness in recent years.

There has been a significant improvement in Ireland's economy-wide cost competitiveness. From the European Commission's most recent spring forecasts, it can be estimated that nominal unit labour costs in Ireland fell by nearly 8 percent between 2008 and 2014. This compares with an increase of 12 per cent in the UK and 8 per cent in the euro area over the same time period.

In addition, relatively low consumer price inflation over the last number of years has contributed to the improvement in Ireland's competitiveness because Irish price levels have fallen considerably relative to those of our euro area peers. For instance, annual HICP inflation in Ireland has been below that of the euro area average for every year since 2009.

The European Central Bank's Expanded Asset Purchase Programme (EAPP) which began

on 9 March, has been associated with a depreciation of the euro in recent months. With the US and the UK being Ireland's biggest trading partners outside the euro area, a depreciation of the euro against the dollar and sterling have a particularly positive impact on Ireland's competitiveness and therefore the export potential of firms in Ireland. The real Harmonised Competitiveness Indicator (HCI) measures the trade weighted exchange rate for Ireland, adjusted for relative price developments in trading partners. Between April 2008 and March 2015 Ireland's real HCI fell by over 23 per cent, indicating a significant improvement in competitiveness over the period.

The gains in Irish competitiveness achieved since 2008 have been hard-won through productivity improvements, wage and price moderation. It is important that this competitiveness is preserved and continues to support growth. In this regard we must be cognisant that favourable exchange rate movements and gains from the fall in oil prices may unwind in the future. Therefore we need to stay focused on continuing to improve Ireland's competitiveness through other channels such as wage and productivity improvements.

Economic Data

62. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which all economic indicators have been stress tested, to verify the extent to which this economy remains on recovery and a sound economic development course; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18038/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): My Department analyses all economic indicators continuously throughout the year to provide up-to-date policy advice and to produce the economic forecasts that underpin the Budget and Stability Programme Update.

In general, recent indicators have been positive, indicating that the recovery is gaining momentum and becoming more broad based.

First estimates of economic activity for 2014 show that annual GDP increased by 4.8 per cent while GNP rose by 5.2 per cent. Encouragingly, domestic demand made its first positive contribution to growth since the crisis began with consumption increasing by 1.1 per cent in 2014 compared to 2013 and investment up 11.3 per cent over the same period. Exports rose by 12.6 per cent annually with imports rising by 13.2 per cent.

The economic recovery is perhaps most clearly evident in the labour market where we have now had nine successive quarters of solid employment growth. As a result, the unemployment rate has fallen 5 percentage points since its peak in early 2012.

High frequency data relating to 2015 have also been encouraging:

- Consumer spending has been strong in Q1 2015 with retail sales up by almost 9 per cent year on year. Core sales (excluding motor trades) were up close to 5 per cent over the same period.

- Investment is also growing with both building/construction and machinery/equipment spending on a rising path. Recovery in the construction sector continued in March with the Purchasing Managers' Index for the sector recording its nineteenth successive month of expansion.

- These encouraging macroeconomic data are mirrored in the total taxation receipts which are up strongly in the first four months of the year.

My Department published its latest macroeconomic forecasts in April with the Stability Programme Update 2015. GDP is expected to expand by 4.0 per cent in 2015 and by 3.8 per cent in 2016. Over the remainder of the decade, Departmental estimates indicate that the economy has the capacity to grow by around 3-3¼ per cent per annum. These forecasts reflect the latest economic indicators and demonstrate that a sustained recovery is under way.

Government Bonds

63. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if consideration remains to be given to the raising of specific Government bonds to fund particular areas where infrastructural deficits have been identified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18039/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The proceeds of all borrowings by the Exchequer, as well as tax revenues, non-tax revenues and other receipts are lodged to the Exchequer account at the Central Bank of Ireland to fund on-going Government expenditure.

The National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) has advised that project-specific bonds issued by the State which are linked to a specific project and which are serviced and repaid from the Exchequer in the same way as standard Government bonds, may be of limited interest to investors as they would be concerned about a relative lack of liquidity. Investors in project-specific bonds would require higher yields than standard Government bonds to reflect the lower liquidity. Such project-specific bonds, if issued by Government, would be on the Government's balance sheet.

However in the case of a Public Private Partnership (PPP), where the State selects a private consortium to Design, Build, Finance & Operate State infrastructure, that private consortium can issue project-specific bonds. Such bond issuance may be deemed to be outside of General Government provided that the necessary risks are contractually transferred to the private sector in line with Eurostat rules. The latter type bonds are considered by investors to carry significantly more risk than standard Government issued bonds and consequently require higher yields to reflect the risk profile. The National Development Finance Agency (NDFA) has advised that there is currently a strong supply of funders/investors for PPP projects.

I am happy to confirm that the Government remains committed to exploring alternative means of financing capital projects. The NDFA is charged with advising on the optimal means of financing the costs of all public investment projects over €20 million in order to achieve value for money, including the €2.25 billion stimulus package announced by the Government in July 2012. NDFA continues to facilitate securing funding for both PPPs and non-PPP capital projects from a wide range of sources including domestic and international banks, institutional investors and supranational organisations such as the European Investment Bank and the Council of Europe Development Bank.

Economic Growth

64. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he remains satisfied that he and his Department have identified most, or all, of any likely obstacles to continued, consistent economic development over the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18040/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): My Department consistently monitors risks and obstacles to economic development over the short- to medium-term. The identification of potential obstacles is essential in the context of economic and fiscal forecasting.

This year, my Department expects the economy to grow by 4 per cent and to grow by 3.8 per cent next year. Over the medium term, the economy can probably grow by around 3-3¼ per cent per annum on a sustainable basis. Achieving these growth rates is contingent upon many factors including trading partner growth, continued improvements in competitiveness, sustainable public finances, access to credit, etc.

We have no control over some of these, but we do over others. As set out in the Spring Economic Statement (SES), the Government is using all policy instruments available to ensure continued improvements in competitiveness, sustainable public finances and improved access to credit. So we are putting in place the framework conditions to help ensure medium-term growth rates of around 3-3¼ per cent per annum are achieved.

But of course there are risks, and in this context the Stability Programme Update (published alongside the SES) sets out a number of potential risks to continued economic development. Quantitative estimates of the impact of particular risks emerging are also provided.

A broader array of risks will be set out in the forthcoming National Risk Assessment 2015. Its purpose is to identify the risks which Ireland faces and therefore ensure appropriate prevention and mitigation measures are in place.

National Debt Servicing

65. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which total national debt as a percentage of gross domestic product has remained constant, or has fluctuated, over the past three years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18041/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): As per the Deputy's request debt as a percentage of GDP for the past three years can be outlined as follows:

	2012	2013	2014
National debt (€m)	137,632	173,947	182,310
General government debt (€m)	210,238	215,328	203,319
GDP (€m)	172,755	174,791	185,412
National debt (% GDP)	79.7	99.5	98.3
General government debt (%GDP)	121.7	123.2	109.7

Source: Central Statistics Office (CSO)

It should be noted that National Debt is the net debt incurred by the Exchequer after taking account of cash and other financial assets while General Government Debt (GGD) is a measure of the total gross consolidated debt of the State compiled by the Central Statistics Office (CSO). This is the measure used for comparative purposes across the European Union.

As per the recently published 'Stability Programme Update 2015' the debt to GDP ratio is expected to have peaked in 2013 and has continued on a downward trajectory since this date.

The Deputy should also be made aware that the aforementioned figures are published on the CSO website.

Property Valuations

66. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which house property prices continue to impact negatively or positively on the economy in general; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18042/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): According to the Central Statistics Office, national residential property prices increased by 16.8 per cent over the 12 months to March. Looking at more recent trends, prices decreased by 0.9 per cent in the first quarter of 2015, although the latest figures for March indicated a monthly price increase of 0.9 per cent. It is too soon to say whether the recent developments in prices represent a break from the property price inflation pattern exhibited over the past two years.

Rising residential property prices can impact on the economy through a number of channels.

The current situation is one where housing supply has not yet responded commensurately to the increase in demand in urban areas, the latter driven by underlying demographic factors and by the economic recovery. In this context, an increase in residential property prices can be expected to lead to an increase in the supply of new housing to the market. An increase in property prices improves the profitability of construction and should encourage developers to construct new housing, resulting in an increase in the level of supply. There is some evidence to show that housing supply is beginning to respond. Over the last year over 11,000 housing units were completed nationally representing more than a 30 per cent increase over the previous year.

Furthermore, rising property prices add to market liquidity as owners and investors bring second hand properties to the market. A more liquid property market should help support individuals' mobility within the economy.

Residential property price increases are also relevant in alleviating the extent of negative equity and household over-indebtedness. The reduction in negative equity should improve mobility amongst those affected, further supporting the economy's recovery. In addition, increasing property prices may lead to an increase in consumption through a wealth effect.

Rising property valuations also have a direct impact on our bank investments. To the extent that they feed through positively to impairment provisions, it further strengthens the banks' capital positions and consequently improves the valuation of the State's shareholdings. In addition rising values can also assist the credit channel through the provision of stronger collateral.

On the other hand, excessive property price increases could adversely affect the affordability of accommodation. This could restrict individuals' mobility and harm our economic competitiveness. In light of this, a return to affordability levels seen at the peak of the property bubble would be unwelcome.

As the Deputy will be aware, it is Government policy to tackle the impediments and barriers to housing supply which should contribute to a reduction in property price pressures. Construction 2020 sets out the Government's strategy for addressing issues in the property and construction sectors. The strategy involves ensuring that any critical bottlenecks impeding the sector in meeting residential and commercial demand are addressed. It incorporates 75 time-bound actions encompassing the development of an overall strategic approach to housing supply, identifying and implementing further improvements in the planning process, and seeking to improve financing options for development and mortgage provision. This work is complemented by the Social Housing Strategy which was launched last November. This Strategy aims to provide more than 35,000 new homes to meet social housing needs by 2020 and to deliver up to 75,000

units of long term accommodation through local authority housing support schemes for tenants.

Mortgage Lending

67. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if he is satisfied that sub-prime lending has ceased or that any evidence exists of interest rates reminiscent of a previous era continuing to apply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18043/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): Sub-prime lenders usually lend to borrowers who are unable to borrow from traditional lenders usually due to insufficient income or poor credit history. They charge higher interest rates due to the higher risk involved.

Moneylenders are licensed by the Central Bank of Ireland to engage in the business of Moneylending under Part VIII of the Consumer Credit Act, 1995 (as amended). The total cost of credit to the consumer under a moneylending agreement may be in excess of an APR of 23 per cent so could be considered a form of sub-prime lending.

However the phrase is often used to refer to mortgage lending and the new macro prudential regulations introduced earlier this year by the Central Bank of Ireland were put in place to support more sustainable mortgage lending and to increase the resilience of the banking and household sectors in relation to the property market. The regulations set certain loan to value and loan to income restrictions on residential mortgage lending and will apply to all mortgage lenders regulated by the Central Bank, including retail credit firms.

It should be noted that these regulations are additional to an individual lenders credit policies and are not designed to replace the requirements on regulated lenders to assess the affordability of credit and compliance with the other consumer protection measures as set out in the 2012 Consumer Protection Code.

Lists of authorised retail credit firms and moneylenders are available on the Central Bank's website.

Credit Availability

68. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if he remains satisfied regarding the availability of adequate credit facilities to small and medium-sized enterprises; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18044/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): This Government recognises that small businesses play a central role in the sustainable recovery of the Irish economy. To facilitate this, Government policy since 2011 has been focused on ensuring that all viable SMEs have access to an appropriate supply of credit facilities from a diverse range of bank and non-bank sources.

On 19 February 2015, the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland launched its initial range of products. The SBCI has already signed up the two largest SME lenders in the country, AIB and Bank of Ireland, to deliver products to SMEs. Loans have been available from 9 March 2015 at branches of both banks throughout the entire country. SBCI's funding must be passed to SMEs and the SMEs must receive the full benefit of any discounted rate offered to the partner lenders. SBCI has committed €200m to each of the initial bank lending partners and has a further €400m available to other future lenders. Talks are continuing with a number of other potential funding partners from both the banking and non-banking worlds. The SBCI will offer longer term loans, working capital facilities of 2 years' duration, loans to agriculture and

loans for the refinancing of credit originally extended by banks who have since exited the Irish market. Further information is available at <http://sbci.gov.ie/>.

The Supporting SMEs Online Tool, a cross-government initiative, was launched in May 2014. On answering 8 simple questions, the small business will receive a list of available Government supports. The Supporting SMEs Online Tool is available at www.localenterprise.ie/smeonlinetool.

The Credit Guarantee Scheme encourages additional lending to small businesses by offering a partial Government guarantee to banks against losses on qualifying loans to eligible SMEs. The Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation and my Department have worked on an amendment to the existing guarantee scheme to provide funding to SMEs whose banks are exiting the Irish market. My colleague, the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, will shortly bring legislation to the Oireachtas which will enable the development of a more flexible Credit Guarantee Scheme with longer duration and more products and providers included.

The Microenterprise Loan Fund, administered by Microfinance Ireland, provides loans of up to €25,000 to small businesses who have been refused credit by commercial banks. Microfinance Ireland works in partnership with the Local Enterprise Offices nationally to administer this fund. This scheme is currently being reviewed by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation with a view to making proposed changes to enhance its effectiveness.

The Credit Review Office helps SME or Farm borrowers who have had an application for credit of up to €3 million declined or reduced by either Bank of Ireland or Allied Irish Banks, and who feel that they have a viable business proposition. They also examine cases where borrowers feel that the terms and conditions of their existing loan, or a new loan offer, are unfairly onerous or have been unreasonably changed to their detriment. This is a strictly confidential process between the business, the Credit Review Office and the bank. The Credit Reviewer, John Trethowan and his team, have overturned 55% of the refusals that have been appealed to the Office. Further details are available at www.creditreview.ie.

In seeking to build on the progress to date and to further support the financing of growth within the SME sector our focus in 2015, outlined in the Action Plan for Jobs, will be to implement a series of actions under the following thematic areas:

- Support and influence the effective implementation of major policy initiatives to ensure that the maximum benefits are afforded to SMEs;
- Continue to raise awareness and understanding amongst SMEs and entrepreneurs of the full suite of State business supports that are available;
- Ensure that the Local Enterprise Office network is a key conduit in providing information, support and advice to small businesses on access to finance issues and strengthen the linkages between enterprise capacity building, accessing finance and business guidance;
 - Deepen our engagement with international funding institutions;
 - Facilitate and support the development of a more diverse range of financing options for SMEs;
 - Maintain a strong focus on policy impact, evaluation and learning; and
 - Develop measures to ensure prompt payments and promote improvements in the payment culture and practices in Ireland.

The Government remains committed to the SME sector and sees it as the key engine of ongoing economic growth. Consequently the Department of Finance, working with the other relevant Departments and Agencies, will continue to monitor the availability of both bank and non-bank credit with a view to taking appropriate actions as warranted to ensure that SMEs in Ireland have the opportunity to reach their full potential in terms of growth and employment generation.

Loan Books Purchasers

69. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which he remains satisfied that borrowers are not disadvantaged in instances where loan books are sold to regulated or unregulated institutions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18045/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Bill 2015 will require entities dealing with the consumer to be authorised by the Central Bank and subject to its Codes of Conduct. Dealing with the consumer is credit servicing and the definition of credit servicing is broad. Owners of loan books who deal directly with consumers, that is, who are servicing their own loan books, will be regulated. Otherwise they can have the loan book serviced by a regulated credit servicing firm. The aim of the Bill is to ensure that borrowers who have had their loans sold on to unregulated institutions will have the same protections they had when their loan was with a regulated financial services provider.

The Bill was published in January and second stage of the Bill was taken in the Dáil on 4 February. Since then, my officials have been in contact with the Central Bank and with the Office of the Attorney General to further progress the legislation. The Bill will continue its progress through the legislative process and I look forward to further discussion of the Bill at Committee Stage.

Household Savings Rate

70. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which the level of savings continues to remain strong; if fluctuations have occurred; if competing agencies for such savings have emerged; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18046/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): CSO estimates for 2014 indicate that gross saving for the economy as a whole amounted to €45.6 billion, an increase of 23.9 per cent compared with 2013.

On a seasonally adjusted basis, the household savings ratio was almost 14 per cent in Q3 and Q4 of last year - the highest level since Q1 2012.

Household indebtedness in Ireland is high in comparative terms and as a result household savings are expected to remain strong as the deleveraging process continues. However, my Department expects a modest decline in the savings rate over the remainder of the decade as the need for precautionary savings recedes.

In terms of competing agencies for savings, the financial landscape is a dynamic one and there are always changes. However, I am not aware of any substantial changes in this area in recent months.

Insurance Costs

71. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which insurance costs here are comparable with those in other European and adjoining jurisdictions, with particular reference to the need for competitiveness; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18047/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): International comparisons of insurance costs can prove problematic as a result of differences in law, in fiscal regime, in policyholder behaviour and in the expectations of policyholders from their insurance provider. Neither my Department nor the Central Bank of Ireland maintains information on the costs of insurance in Ireland or across the European Union.

The calculation of annual premium rates is a commercial decision for the insurance company in question. It should be noted that the ability of the Government to influence insurance costs is limited as insurance companies are required under European law to price in accordance with risk and neither I, as Minister for Finance, nor the Central Bank of Ireland has the power to direct insurance companies on the pricing of insurance products.

While competition in the market place acts as an effective constraint on insurance costs, insurance companies have to be conscious of their prudential obligations and are required by the Central Bank of Ireland to meet their capital requirements on an ongoing basis in order to ensure the sustainability of their business. In circumstances where they are exposed to a high level of claims, it is possible that their capital position can be affected with a consequential effect on prices. In this regard, it should be noted that the new prudential regime for insurers across the EU known as Solvency II, which will come into force from the start of 2016, will place a greater emphasis than the existing regime on the need to price risk appropriately, and will in turn require insurance companies to be more conscious of their pricing policy. This will benefit the consumer in many instances.

Government initiatives such as the establishment of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board and legislation to improve road safety, which has reduced accidents significantly, continue to make a major contribution to keeping insurance costs at a reasonable level.

Pension Provisions

72. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if he will examine a pension issue (details supplied). [18058/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): While it is not absolutely clear from the details supplied, I am assuming that the questions at issue relate to past changes that were made to the annual earnings limit which, along with age-related percentage limits, determine the maximum tax-relievable pension contributions that an individual can make in a tax year and to the 0.6% pension fund levy which I introduced in 2011.

In that regard, I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the earnings limit which was originally set at €254,000 in 2003 and increased through indexation to €275,239 by 2008, was subsequently reduced by the previous Government to €150,000 in 2009 and further reduced to its present level of €115,000 as part of a range of pension-related measures introduced in Budget and Finance Act 2011 by that administration.

It should be borne in mind that all of the pension-related changes made at that time were

implemented against the very difficult and challenging budgetary situation which was facing the country and continued to face the country in the years that followed. It was clear that the tax base had to be broadened and tax expenditures curtailed or abolished if the serious financial and economic problems facing the country were to be addressed. Given the very significant cost of pension tax reliefs, such reliefs could not escape attention. Apart from contributing to the curbing of overall tax expenditures, the pension-related tax changes introduced also brought greater equity to the system by impacting for the most part primarily on higher earners. Indeed, I have introduced further restrictions in this area by, for example, reducing the Standard Fund Threshold (SFT) the maximum tax relievable pension fund at retirement to €2 million from its previous level of €2.3 million with effect from 1 January 2014 and by changing the valuation factor used for establishing the capital value of defined benefit pension schemes from a standard factor of 20 to a higher age-related factor that varies with the individual's age at the point at which pension benefits are drawn down. These changes to the SFT regime apply to pension arrangements across the board in both the private and the public sector.

In the same vein, the original 0.6% stamp duty levy on pension fund assets, which I introduced in 2011 and which ended last year, was used to fund the wide range of measures introduced in the Jobs Initiative to protect existing jobs and create new jobs. These include expenditure measures such as the JobBridge and the Springboard schemes, as well as a number of tax and PRSI incentives, such as the reduction in the VAT rate from 13.5% to 9% for the tourism and hospitality sectors and the halving of the lower employer PRSI rate. It is the case that the levy does not apply to unfunded public service pension schemes. However, the pensions of public servants have been subject to a public service pension reduction (PSPR) since 1 January 2011. The PSPR was introduced on 1 January 2011 under the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2010. The PSPR is not a levy but is a pension cut affecting public service pensions, including those of former members of the Oireachtas and Ministers.

While the 0.6% pension fund levy has ceased and the lower 0.15% levy introduced for 2014 and 2015 will not apply beyond 2015, I have no plans to either repay the pension fund levy tax collected or to retrospectively reinstate the higher earnings limit for pension contributions, as may be implied in the details supplied with the question.

Overall, the restrictions in tax expenditures and the funds raised by way of the levy have helped to create the improving financial and economic position of the State. We have begun to see the benefits of this improving position as evident from the changes which I began in Budget 2015 and which will continue in future Budgets to reduce the income tax burden on low and middle income earners.

VAT Rate Application

73. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if he will explain the discrepancies in respect of value added tax being charged by telecommunication companies (details supplied). [18069/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of EU VAT law with which Irish VAT law must comply. The reduced VAT rate of 13.5% applies to the supply of gas and electricity in Ireland. The majority of EU Member States apply a much higher VAT rate to the supply of gas and electricity as EU VAT law provides that the standard VAT rate should apply to these services. However, as part of a derogation to EU VAT law, Ireland is entitled to retain a reduced rate to the supply of gas and electricity on the basis that we applied a reduced rate to the supply of domestic fuels on 1 January 1991.

Separately, in relation to telecommunication, internet and television broadcasting services provided by companies such as UPC or Vodafone, these services are subject to the standard rate of VAT which is 23% in Ireland.

In accordance with section 37(1) of the Value-Added Tax Consolidation Act 2010, the amount on which VAT is chargeable is the total consideration receivable by the supplier, “including all taxes, commissions, costs and charges whatsoever”, but not including the VAT itself. This reflects EU VAT law, with which Irish tax law must comply. In this regard, Article 78 of the EU VAT Directive provides that the taxable amount shall include “taxes, duties, levies and charges, excluding the VAT itself”.

In this respect, where the charge for a supply of service, such as an electricity bill, includes the Public Service Obligation (PSO) levy, VAT law dictates that VAT should be calculated on the PSO levy element of the charge as well as the charge for the service. The same situation applies in respect of a service charge on other bills as outlined by the Deputy.

Public Sector Staff Increments

74. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under his remit per year since 2008. [18070/15]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I wish to inform the Deputy that the calculation of increments is a matter for the Payroll Shared Service Centre, who have informed me that because of the variables involved i.e. payees starting and leaving, staff moving on/off sick pay, staff changing worksharing patterns, etc. it is virtually impossible to provide an answer to this Parliamentary Question.

However my Officials are calculating figures based on an average of an increment per grade and the number of increments paid each year in my Department. Information in relation to bodies under the aegis of my Department are also being sought. I will revert to the Deputy directly as soon as the data are available.

Public Procurement Contracts

75. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when competition for permits (details supplied) will be initiated; the reason for the delay to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17902/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Simon Harris): The Office of Public Works (OPW) is preparing a competition process for new Boat Permits at Skellig which it is hoped will be publicly advertised in due course.

There are a number of legal implications relative to the proposed competition process to be assessed in conjunction with the OPW’s advisers before the competition is advertised and these are being considered currently by the Chief State Solicitors Office and the Office of the Attorney General. Once these matters have been fully addressed, the OPW will make a decision in relation to the next steps.

Pensions Legislation

76. **Deputy Seán Kyne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans regarding the rescinding of measures in the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2013, with particular reference to the impact of the legislation on pensions currently in payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17934/15]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brendan Howlin): I have invited the Public Services Committee of ICTU to discussions on an approach to commencing the gradual unwinding of the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (FEMPI) legislation which provides inter alia for the imposition of a public service pension reduction (PSPR). Both I and my officials have also had a number of meetings and ongoing engagement with the Association of Retired Public Servants (ARPS) regarding the impact of the PSPR on public service pensions under the FEMPI legislation.

I have previously stated my intention, as a matter of priority, to move towards reducing the burden of public service pension reductions, with the initial focus on the people in receipt of low pensions, at the earliest date economic progress permits.

Public Sector Staff Remuneration

77. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide, in tabular form, the number of applications for increases in remuneration for any person or persons received by his Department from public service employers since 1 January 2014; the details of the applications for increase, that is, the posts and levels of increase involved; whether the applications were approved; and if he will clearly indicate the number of these applications involving persons in agencies that were funded under section 38 of the Health Act 2004. [17975/15]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brendan Howlin): I refer the Deputy to my reply to parliamentary question No. 321 on 21st April 2015 (ref. 15494/15). As regards agencies funded under Section 38 of the Health Act 2004, it is equally the case that any applications for increases in remuneration in respect of such agencies fall to be considered in the context of the Haddington Road Agreement and FEMPI legislation.

Public Sector Staff Increments

78. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under his remit per year since 2008. [18336/15]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brendan Howlin): In response to the Deputy's question the following table outlines the approximate annual cost of increment payments to staff in my Department and those under my remit since the formation of my Department on 6 July 2011.

	2011	2012	2013	2014
Department of Public Expenditure & Reform	€60,199	€126,270	€182,113	€183,175
Institute of Public Administration (IPA)	€105,000	€105,000	€105,000	€105,000

	2011	2012	2013	2014
The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB)	€3,432	€3,943	€7,408	€5,578
The State Laboratory	€34,500	€24,600	€16,600	€25,000
The Office of the Ombudsman	€36,400	€38,300	€33,600	€30,350

The Office of Public Works, the Valuation Office and the Public Appointments Service are unable to provide a response in the time permitted but have assured me that they will respond directly to you by 29 May 2015.

Grocery Industry Regulation

79. **Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation when the published draft grocery regulations aimed at ensuring transparency and predictability in the relationships between suppliers and retailers will come into effect. [17921/15]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): The programme for Government contains a commitment to regulate certain practices in the grocery goods sector and this will be met by way of enabling powers to regulate certain practices in the grocery goods sector. These powers are contained in the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014. On 22 December 2014, I issued a set of draft regulations for public consultation with a deadline for submissions of the end of February 2015. However, some respondents requested an extension of the deadline into March 2015 for submissions. The contents of submissions received are currently being fully considered before the final version of the regulations is promulgated, and the regulations are signed by me, as soon as possible during 2015.

Allegations of unfair practice in the grocery goods sector have been made over a number of years. As the Deputy will know, I have consistently emphasised that it is important to ensure there is balance in the relationship between the various players in the grocery goods sector and that Ireland continues to have robust agri-food and retail sectors, particularly given the importance of these sectors to the national economy. The regulation of certain practices in the grocery goods sector is intended to achieve such a balance taking into account the interests of all stakeholders in the grocery goods sector including the interests of the consumer and the need to ensure that there is no impediment to the passing-on of lower prices to consumers.

Departmental Expenditure

80. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the amount spent by his Department since March 2011 on advertising its Action Plan for Jobs; and if he will provide, in tabular form, the detail of this expenditure, listing each place it was advertised and the cost. [17951/15]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Department does not advertise its annual Action Plan for Jobs, the first one of which was launched in February 2012, and each year since.

This year, in response to a well-recognised demand for more information on Government supports for SMEs, the Department decided to run an awareness campaign to address this deficit. Following a tender process in the Official Journal of the European Union, a successful ten-

der was identified. This awareness campaign uses the web address *www.actionplanforjobs.ie* as a landing page for those interested in using the Government's online SME tool which helps explain what supports one might qualify for. The campaign uses business representative groups like SFA, ISME and Chambers Ireland, as well as experienced and young entrepreneurs in the advertising to raise awareness of the supports available.

A total budget of €250,000 plus VAT for the awareness campaign has been provided for within the Department's existing resources. To date, €88,450 has been paid with both digital and radio advertisement selected as best value for money. Ads have, to date, been run on RTE Radio, Today FM, Newstalk, Media Central, Independent Digital, Irish Times web and RTE Online.

In the first three week phase of the campaign, almost 12,000 people visited the website and the numbers using the online SME tool doubled.

Ministerial Appointments

81. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation his views on correspondence (details supplied) regarding an appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18048/15]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Government approved the delegation of responsibility for implementation of the Construction Contracts Act 2013 to my colleague, the Minister of State for Business and Employment, Deputy Gerald Nash., last November.

I am informed that Minister Nash intends to appoint a Chairperson of the Ministerial Panel of Adjudicators, which is to be established under the Act, as soon as is practicable, having regard to procedural and contractual considerations.

Forestry Premium Payments

82. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when final payment will issue in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17942/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The application for approval to plant under the Afforestation Scheme application number CN58456 was refused as the site was too exposed. Therefore, no payments were applied for or are due under this contract number.

All forestry premium payments under CN53972 have been made to the applicant and there are currently no outstanding premium payments. An application form for the second instalment of the establishment grant (Form 3) under this contract was sent to the applicant on 16 February 2015 for completion. It has not yet been returned to the Department. Therefore, there are no outstanding payments to be processed under this contract in the Department currently.

Single Payment Scheme Eligibility

83. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

if a person (details supplied) in County Wexford is entitled to a single payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17954/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department received an application from the person named for an allocation of entitlements under the 2012 National Reserve Scheme on 10th May 2012. This application was rejected as one of the requirements for an allocation of entitlements from the 2012 National Reserve was that a farmer must have commenced farming after 17th May 2010. Departmental records show that the person named commenced farming in 1999. The person named will therefore not qualify under the Young Farmers Scheme.

If the person named has never held any entitlements he may be eligible to apply for an allocation of entitlements under the Scottish Derogation. Detailed Terms and Conditions for the Scottish Derogation are available on my Department's website www.agriculture.gov.ie. My Department can be contacted directly at lo call 0761 064447 if any further information is required.

Agriculture Scheme Eligibility

84. **Deputy Paul J. Connaughton** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason a second penalty has been imposed on a single payment in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Galway, when a previous penalty was dealt with through an appeal. [17971/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): An application under the 2013 Single Payment/Disadvantaged Areas Schemes was received from the person named on 17 April 2013 and payments of €5,642.31 and €3,532.77 were issued on 16 October 2013 and 2 December 2013 respectively under the Single Farm Payment Scheme. A payment of €2,553.33 was issued on 20 September 2013 under the 2013 Disadvantaged Areas Scheme.

A review of the land parcels declared by the person named under the 2013 Single Payment Scheme revealed that several of the land parcels declared by the person named contained ineligible features and the person named was notified. These area reductions resulted in a reduction between 3% and 20% to the area payable under the 2013 Direct Payment Schemes. Therefore, any payments made under the 2013 Schemes, which are now deemed to be over - paid will have to be offset against future payments made to the applicant by my Department.

The person named was notified of this decision and of her right of appeal. Following the review of my Department's decision, sought by the person named, a visit by a Department official to verify the position on the ground was necessary. The finding of the verification check resulted in a further reduction in the overall payable area from 25.28 hectares to 22.52 hectares.

A letter detailing the outcome of the verification check was issued to the person named on 26 July 2014 where she was advised of the option open to her to pursue the matter to the independent LPIS Appeals Committee should she so wish. The person named opted to avail of her right to appeal her case to the independently-chaired LPIS Appeal Committee. Following due consideration, the LPIS Appeal Committee rejected her appeal, and she was notified of the decision by letter on 29 October 2014. The person named can appeal this decision to the Office of the Ombudsman if she so wishes.

Tuberculosis Incidence

85. **Deputy Andrew Doyle** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the level of tuberculosis outbreaks in County Wicklow since 1985, broken down by district electoral division and in five-year intervals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17977/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The following table details the herd incidence for TB and the number of reactors in the Wicklow East and Wicklow West regions. It is not possible to provide a more detailed breakdown based on the district electoral division in the time available.

Year		Wicklow East		Wicklow West
	Reactors Numbers	Herd Incidence	Reactors Numbers	Herd Incidence
1985	353*	NA	NA	NA
1990	382	5.98%	287	6.62%
1995	688	10.68%	252	8.05%
2000	562	9.21%	398	12.17%
2005	268	6.69%	166	5.66%
2010	833	15.72%	85	4.81%
2011	665	11.10%	490	7.60%
2012	724	10.64%	226	9.64%
2013	577	8.18%	124	7.46%
2014	1029	8.15%	189	8.47%

*Herd incidence not available in 1985 nor is a breakdown between East and West.

Levels of bovine TB have remained disappointingly high in Wicklow when compared with the progress achieved nationally, where herd incidence has declined annually in recent years and at the end of 2014 stood at 3.64% compared with 5.88% in 2008. My Department remains of the view that infection from wildlife, in particular badgers, remains a particular issue in the Wicklow area. For example, a recent study conducted in the Callary area detected a TB culture confirmation rate in badgers of over 26% which compares with a national rate of 13.3%. The level of TB found in badgers was also considerably higher than that found in deer in that area, where 4.8% of deer had visible lesions, with 15.5% culturing positive for TB. Strain typing with a view to establishing a clearer picture of the origin or transmission pathways for the infection as between the species is ongoing.

While my Department continues to implement a badger removal programme in Wicklow as it does in other relevant areas, responsibility for wild deer rests, under the Wildlife Acts, with the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. A non-statutory Irish Deer Management forum has recently been established with an independent chairman and includes representation from stakeholder groups, as well as the Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. It is intended that results of the exercise conducted in Callary will initially be considered by the forum.

Agriculture Scheme Eligibility

86. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if exceptions will be made for inclusion on the old young farmers scheme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18015/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): In accordance with the EU Regulations governing the Young Farmers Scheme and the Young Farmer priority category of the National Reserve, a ‘young farmer’ is defined as:

- S/he is aged no more than 40 years of age in the year when s/he first submits an application under the Basic Payment Scheme;

- S/he is setting up an agricultural holding for the first time or has set up such a holding during the five years preceding the first submission of the Basic Payment Scheme application.

As these Regulations are applicable to all Member States, my Department has no discretion with regard to their implementation.

The ‘Old Young Farmer’ category under phase 2 of the National Reserve opened for applications on 1st April 2015. Eligible applicants under the ‘Old Young Farmer’ category must also meet the definition of young farmer with regard to age, off farm income and educational qualifications.

‘New Entrants’ to farming were catered for as a priority category under phase 1 of the National Reserve which opened for applications on 5th January 2015 and closed for receipt of applications on 31st March 2015. This category of the National Reserve catered for farmers over the age of 40 years who had only been involved in active farming for 2 years previously. To be eligible under this category an applicant must have commenced agricultural activity in 2013 or later, not have had any agricultural activity in their own name and at their own risk in the five years preceding the current agricultural activity, as well as satisfying the criteria in respect of off farm income and educational qualifications.

Beef Exports

87. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will confirm reports that the quota may be reached as soon as August 2015 for the export of Irish beef into the market in the United States of America; if he will provide assurances to Irish beef farmers regarding continuity of supply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18020/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): Whereas the U.S. market has now re-opened to the importation of beef from Ireland, there is no associated import quota specifically set aside for Ireland. This is due to the fact that the decision was not part of a multilateral agreement under WTO rules. As a result, import licences must be obtained in respect of the “other countries” beef quota and they are issued on a first-come first-served basis to eligible importers. This quota stands at 64,805 tonnes for the current year.

The latest market information I have is that 27.8% of the ‘other countries’ annual quota was filled by April 20, 2015. At the same stage in 2014, 23% was filled and 86% was filled by year end.

Market intelligence suggests that the ‘other countries’ quota will be filled by end 2015 (for the first time), but 100% fill by August is considered unlikely at this stage.

Agri-Environment Options Scheme

88. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

his views on a matter regarding the agri-environment options scheme 1 in respect of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18059/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): A Department review of the non-productive capital investment claims submitted by applicants under AEOS, was undertaken in 2014. This review identified irregularities with documentation submitted for reimbursement in some of these claims. A full Department investigation was then initiated, which in turn led to the matter being referred to the Gardaí. Payments to applicants under review have been deferred pending the outcome of the investigation.

The application of the person named is one of those being reviewed in the context of this wider investigation. My Department wrote to the person named on 28 January to explain the situation.

My Department plans to write to all participants with payments held shortly seeking further evidence to support their claim for payment, in the amounts declared. Where satisfactory proofs are provided payments will then be processed.

Milk Quota

89. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to set out the position on the superlevy payment that is due for 2014-15; when this payment has to be made; if the arrangements promised by the European Commission to phase the payments over a number of years have been put in place; if not, when the details of these arrangements will be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18071/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The entire super levy liability incurred by milk producers in Ireland for the 2014/2015 milk quota year, estimated to amount to €69 million, must be paid by Member States to the Commission before the end of November 2015.

However, under new arrangements, the Commission will allow Member States to facilitate the payment by milk producers of this super levy liability in three annual instalments, without interest. The first instalment must be paid by 30 September 2015 and the two subsequent payments must be paid in 2016 and 2017.

Arrangements for the introduction of a scheme to recover these monies are currently being finalised by my Department and involve discussions with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. I expect to be announcing the details of the scheme in the very near future.

Dairy Sector

90. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if superlevy payments made to the European Commission are specifically used to support the dairy sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18072/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): Super levy liabilities which are incurred by member states are paid to the European Agriculture Guarantee Fund (EAGF). The EAGF primarily finances direct payments to farmers and measures regulating or supporting agricultural markets.

Super levy liabilities paid into the fund are not ring fenced for use in specifically support-

ing the dairy sector, but are taken into account as assigned revenue in determining the overall EAGF budget.

Pigmeat Sector

91. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to outline the measures he proposes to implement to support the pigmeat sector, in view of current difficulties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18073/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The development of the pigmeat sector is a priority for me given the crucial role which the industry plays in supporting approximately 7,000 jobs including production, slaughter, processing, feed manufacture and services. In 2014 export volumes increased by approximately 7%, with growth to the UK, Continental Europe and International markets. Export values increased by some 3% and are in the range of €570 million, continuing the growth seen in recent years. Pigmeat prices tend to be cyclical in nature with periods of lower prices and production followed by recovery. My Department carefully monitors developments in the pig sector, both domestically and internationally.

I am conscious of the fact that prices have come under pressure in recent months and the difficulties that this is causing for producers. Having said that, it must be noted that Irish prices remain above the EU average at present. However I would also add that like any other EU Minister I do not have a role in the setting of prices. This is a function of the market.

Earlier this year I called on the European Commission to monitor the developments on markets and where necessary, to quickly activate safety net provisions such as public interventions and/or private storage aid. This resulted in the introduction of the Aids to Private Storage scheme for the pigmeat sector which opened in early March of this year. However due to the fact that EU pigmeat market prices stabilised somewhat over recent weeks and the uptake of the scheme by operators dropped to minimal volumes, the Commission closed the scheme as of last week.

In relation to the Russian ban on EU pigmeat exports, I am fully aware of the concerns Irish pig farmers have as a result of the closure of this market. My Department has met with the Russian authorities on a number of occasions to impress upon them the importance we attach to the normalisation of trade with Russia. Ultimately however, the Russian ban on pigmeat is an EU wide issue and is likely only to be resolved at EU level. The Commission has referred this matter to the WTO for resolution.

Support is provided by my Department for the pig sector in a number of ways. Firstly I have included provision in the Rural Development Programme for an on-farm capital investment scheme, TAMS II, with an overall budget of €395 million across all sectors. Some €37 million has been allocated for 2015. Amongst the areas identified for initial funding are investments on pig farms for energy, water meters and medicine dispensers. Other elements of the RDP, such as a targeted on farm animal health and welfare scheme will also be of benefit to the pig sector.

Other supports for the sector come through Teagasc which, through its Moorepark pig research facility and courses in pig production, plays an important role in improving production at farm level. Through its Joint Research Advisory Programme, Teagasc supports Irish pig producers by providing advice, research and education across a range of issues of importance to the sector. The programme which is funded by a voluntary industry levy has enabled Teagasc to employ four additional advisors and researchers to support producers and the sector through

advice, research and education across a range of issues of importance to the sector. The high level objective of the programme is to enhance the sustainability of Irish pig meat production, including improvements in economic, social and environmental standards. This will result in improvements in the production and marketability of Irish pigmeat.

I am also conscious of the need to promote the consumption of Irish pigmeat in domestic and overseas markets. Bord Bia provides assistance to the pigmeat sector through its marketing and promotional activities, and the pigmeat quality assurance scheme helps to consolidate the position of Irish pigmeat on the domestic market and to expand its presence on EU and third country markets.

For my part I have undertaken to ensure that as many alternative markets as possible are open to Irish Pigmeat processors since the closure of the Russian market last year. In this regard I was pleased to announce the opening of the markets in Vietnam and the Philippines for Irish pigmeat which will serve as valuable alternative markets to Russia for Irish pigmeat exports. My Department will continue in its efforts to develop access to international markets.

Agriculture Scheme Eligibility

92. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if farmers whose mountain land is accidentally burned before 15 May in any year will be eligible for payment under the basic farm payment scheme and the greening scheme on the basis of force majeure in that year; to set out the situation that would arise if a third party, without the permission of the landholders, started a fire on the land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18074/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): All applicants under the Basic Payment Scheme, the Greening Payment and other area based schemes are obliged to comply with the EU Regulatory requirements on land eligibility. In order to benefit from payment under the Direct Payment Schemes the land must be eligible and must be maintained in a state suitable for grazing or cultivation.

The Wildlife Acts prohibit the burning of growing vegetation within the state between 1st March and 31st August of any given year. Controlled burning undertaken in full compliance with all of the relevant environmental legislative and other lawful requirements can be acceptable. In the case of Natura lands, i.e. lands designated as SAC and/or SPA, prior approval must be obtained under the Activities Requiring Consent (ARC) system as implemented by the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Where burned lands are found at inspection by my Department officials or where cases are brought to the attention of my Department, a full evaluation will be undertaken on a case-by-case basis.

Agriculture Scheme Eligibility

93. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the same rules on eligibility of land that will apply to special areas of conservation and special protection areas under the basic farm payment and greening schemes will also apply to natural heritage areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18075/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The provi-

sions of Article 32 (2) (b) (i) of Regulation (EU) No 1307/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council are clear in that they cover areas, which are no longer eligible for payment under the Basic Payment Scheme, of Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Areas (SPA) and the Water Framework Directive. I have, however, arranged for my officials to raise the issue of the Natural Heritage Areas, which are not covered in Article 32, with the EU Commission.

Agriculture Scheme Eligibility

94. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in view of the new pro rata system being introduced for exclusion of scrub land and so on from eligibility as forage area for the new basic farm payment scheme and the greening scheme, to outline his plans to reissue the maps issued to farmers this year, with reference areas calculated under the old system, and replace them with maps showing the reference areas calculated under the new pro rata system; if extra time will be provided to farmers to readjust their applications in line with the new pro rata system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18076/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The new pro-rata system and the use of the Reduction Coefficient applying to land parcels with scattered scrub are fully explained in the Land Eligibility booklet, which is being issued to all farmers. In essence, the assessment will be undertaken at parcel level following the exclusion of all areas, which are fully ineligible.

The creation of new reference areas for a significant number of land parcels across the entire Land Parcel Identification System (LPIS) database is a complex matter and has to be approached very carefully. Significant and systematic testing is required to ensure that the recalculations are accurate. In addition, the printing of new maps for all of these parcels would take some time. The creation of new reference areas for parcels would mean that new parcel identification numbers would need to be allocated to the altered parcels. Such significant data changes at this stage of the 2015 application period would pose a risk to the farmers or their Agents submitting applications under the Basic Payment Scheme, the Greening Payment and GLAS. Given the timelines and the risks involved it would not be possible to issue new maps to all of the applicants involved at this stage.

GLAS Applications

95. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to set down the total number of new registrations received by his Department in the past week under the green low-carbon agri-environmental scheme; the increase in the number of applicants who have selected actions under this scheme during the same period; the number of completed applications that have been received by his Department in the past week; the total number of applicants now registered for the scheme, the number who have registered actions to date; the number of completed applications received; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18077/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): Within the last week the number of applications registered on the GLAS online system has increased by over 3,700 applications and the number of applications registered with actions has increased by over 3,500 applications. Both these figures are increasing daily. The 'submit' facility was activated this morning on the GLAS on-line system and as of mid-day today 31 applications

had been formally submitted.

To date the total number of registered GLAS applications now stands at almost 25,000 applications with the total number of applications registered with actions now at around 16,700 applications.

The county breakdown for applications and applications with actions is as follows:

County	Number of applications	Number of applications with actions
Carlow	303	204
Cavan	925	665
Clare	1,530	1,108
Cork	2,100	1,411
Donegal	2,249	1,563
Dublin	99	57
Galway	2,711	1,945
Kerry	1,768	1,270
Kildare	313	188
Kilkenny	388	209
Laois	426	287
Leitrim	867	694
Limerick	913	555
Longford	411	294
Louth	190	128
Mayo	2,766	1,815
Meath	489	316
Monaghan	534	418
Offaly	608	311
Roscommon	1,362	924
Sligo	983	611
Tipperary	943	560
Tipperary North	0	0
Tipperary South	0	0
Waterford	415	250
Westmeath	549	417
Wexford	612	336
Wicklow	345	221
Wicklow East	0	0
Wicklow West	0	0
Totals	24,799	16,757

Land Parcel Identification System

96. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to outline the progress made to date in negotiations to reduce the fine imposed on Ireland in respect of the land parcel identification system; the reason for the delay in these negotiations; when it is hoped these negotiations will be concluded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18078/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The EU Commission in its letter dated 14 May 2014, proposed a 2% flat rate financial correction for Ireland of €181.5 million arising from its Conformity Clearance audits in 2009, 2010 and 2012. The payments audited covered the period from 2008 to 2012 during which over €9 billion was paid to farmers in Ireland under the Direct Payment Schemes. I have always been opposed to the imposition of flat-rate penalties and particularly so in this case. I have strongly refuted the application of this proposed correction as disproportionate to the true level of risk involved and on this basis my Department sought a hearing with the Conciliation Body.

Officials from my Department met with the Conciliation Body on 10 December 2014. At the Conciliation Hearing, my Department outlined Ireland's fundamental objection to the flat rate correction and argued that the risk to the Fund should be a calculated amount. My officials informed the Body regarding the amount of work undertaken by my Department to identify and remove all ineligible features from the LPIS database, the technical improvement in the LPIS system and the time and resources used by my Department to address all issues raised by the Commission.

The Conciliation Body acknowledged the amount of work done by my Department over such a short period of time and expressed the opinion that the issues with the Commission related to a few, though important, elements of this work.

The report of the Conciliation Body concluded that conciliation seemed within reach and that the two parties should continue discussing the matter with a view to an agreed settlement. On foot of this my Department has maintained regular contact with the Commission with a view to bringing the matter to a conclusion. Further work has recently been carried out to quantify the level of risk to EU funds and this information is with the Commission for consideration.

Farm Safety

97. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in view of the large number of farm accidents to set out his plans to introduce an equivalent of the safe pass certificate for farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18080/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) has primary responsibility for Health, Safety and Welfare at work, and my Department is fully supportive of their work and assisting in the promotion of safe farming practices. The introduction of a safe pass certificate system for farmers would be the responsibility of the HSA rather than the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. However, I am considering all opportunities to include Farm Safety elements in the RDP rollout.

Herd Data

98. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to set out the number for applications for new herd numbers on hand at present; the average delay in issuing herd numbers; if he will clarify the situation of new applicants who are applying for schemes and have not been issued a herd number by the date of close of applications; the steps he intends taking to resolve this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18084/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department has made special arrangements to ensure that the non-issue of a herd number by the relevant scheme closing date will not impact negatively on applicants under the Basic Payments

Scheme. Where an applicant under the National Reserve priority categories of ‘young farmer’ and ‘new entrant’ had not been issued a herd number or added to a herd number by the closing date of 31 March 2015, their application under the National Reserve will be accepted once they had applied for a herd number or to be added to a herd number prior to 31st March 2015. Similarly, applicants under the Young Farmers Scheme who have not been issued a herd number or added to a herd number by the closing date of 29 May 2015 will have their applications under the Scheme accepted once they have applied for a herd number or to be added to a herd number prior to 29 May.

As expected, there has been a considerable increase in activity in this area and, to date this year, my Department’s Regional Offices have processed over 3,000 new herd number applications and over 3,200 amendments to existing herd numbers. Approximately 3,000 applications for new herd numbers and amendments to herd numbers are currently on hand and are being dealt with as quickly as possible. However, as I have explained, my Department has already taken steps to ensure that this factor will not negatively impact on farmer applicants under the relevant schemes.

Basic Payment Scheme Applications

99. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine whether he can account for the discrepancy between the digital record and the paper record posted in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork in connection with an individual plot area in respect of that person’s 2015 application under the basic payment scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18088/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The person named submitted a 2014 Single Farm Payment/Disadvantaged Areas’ scheme application on 25 April 2014. EU Regulations governing the administration of these schemes require that full and comprehensive administrative checks, including in some cases Remote Sensing (i.e. satellite) inspections, be completed to confirm eligibility under the schemes.

The application of the person named was selected for a Remote Sensing inspection. This initial inspection identified discrepancies between the area declared and the area determined resulting in the area for the parcel concerned being reduced to 35.47 hectares. The person named was notified of this decision by letter issued on 23 December 2014.

A subsequent field inspection to verify the position on the ground determined that this parcel was not eligible for payment under the terms and conditions of the schemes and the area was reduced to 0 hectares. The eligible area of an additional parcel was also reduced by 1.5 hectares. As the total of the over-declaration in area is greater than 50% of the area determined the person named is not entitled to payment under the 2014 Single Payment and Disadvantaged Schemes. The person named will immediately be informed of the outcome of this field visit. The person named will also be informed of the right to seek a review of this decision. In the event that the person named is dissatisfied with the outcome of the review the decision can be appealed to the independent Agriculture Appeals Office, within 3 months.

Proposed Legislation

100. **Deputy Noel Harrington** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress on the drafting of the sea-fisheries and maritime jurisdiction (amendment) Bill; and when this will be brought before Dáil Éireann. [18095/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): An amendment is proposed to the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006 in order to address a number of issues. Firstly it is required under the Fisheries Control Regulation (EU) 1224/2009 to implement a points system for skippers of fishing vessels found to have committed serious fishery infringements. Secondly it is intended to introduce a system of Fixed Penalty Notices for minor fishery infringements; this will deliver on a commitment in the Programme for Government. Thirdly it is intended to affirm in legislation that fishing quotas are a national resource. In addition to this, it is intended that the Bill will resolve some typographical errors and introduce a number of miscellaneous minor amendments. The implementation of the Points system and the system of fixed penalties have proved to be legally complex systems to draft.

The proposal to amend the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act to address these matters was sent to Public Consultation, accompanied by a Regulatory Impact Analysis which looked at the implementation of these commitments and sets out the legal parameters within which the amended legislation must fit.

The consultation period was completed on 9 January 2015 and a range of responses were received which will be considered in the drafting of the Bill. It is intended that the Heads of Bill will be submitted to Government in the Autumn at which time the Bill can commence its legislative passage.

Basic Payment Scheme

101. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if provision will be made in the national reserve for old young farmers to ensure that such farmers who had their deeds stamped subsequent to the allocation of a herd number and who were not able to avail of the installation aid scheme will have their application for the national reserve considered on the basis of the date of the stamping of the deed rather than the allocation of the herd number; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18097/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): Applications under phase 2 of the National Reserve for the group commonly referred to as ‘Old Young Farmers’ opened on 1 April 2015. This measure will cater for farmers who established their holdings in 2008 or 2009, who comply with the definition of young farmer for the purposes of the National Reserve ‘young farmer’ priority category, but who missed out on both the Young Farmer Installation Scheme which closed for applications in 2008 and the young farmer category of the National Reserve which caters for farmers who commenced farming since 2010.

While the Young Farmer Installation Scheme closed for applications on 14 October 2008, I have opted to extend the eligibility date back to include eligible ‘Old Young Farmers’ who established their holdings between 1 January 2008 and 31 December 2009. In this way I have granted the maximum possible flexibility regarding the date of establishment of holdings. Under all of the measures pertaining to the Basic Payment Scheme the date of establishment of the holding is the date the herd number is allocated to the farmer.

Public Sector Staff Increments

102. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under his remit per year since 2008. [18326/15]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The following table sets out the number of increments paid to the staff in my Department for the years 2008-2015:

YEAR	Number of Increments
2008	1706
2009	1685
2010	1578
2011	1246
2012	1086
2013	958
2014	694
Jan-Apr 2015 Inclusive	223

The awarding of an increment is dependent on satisfactory performance by the staff member.

It is not feasible to provide the costs for each year in the time frame available, however the information will be provided directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Defence Forces Personnel Data

103. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Defence the number of Defence Forces personnel, by rank, who retired in the years 2013 and 2014 and to date in 2015. [18006/15]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The number of personnel who left the Defence Forces in the period 1st January 2013 to 1st May 2015 was 1,125. A detailed breakdown of these personnel by rank is contained in the table.

Defence Forces Discharges by Rank, 1 January 2013 to 1 May 2015

Rank	2013	2014	2015	Total
Lieutenant General	1	0	0	1
Brigadier General	1	2	0	3
Colonel	3	8	2	13
Lieutenant Colonel	12	16	2	30
Commandant	20	28	9	57
Captain	21	21	9	51
Lieutenant	2	8	3	13
Sergeant Major	0	5	0	5
Battalion Quartermaster Sergeant	1	5	2	8
Company Sergeant	11	19	4	34
Company Quartermaster Sergeant	14	13	3	30
Sergeant	51	44	22	117
Corporal	59	39	22	120
Private	272	269	92	633

Rank	2013	2014	2015	Total
Cadets	2	5	3	10
Total Discharges	470	482	173	1,125

Public Sector Staff Increments

104. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under his remit per year since 2008. [18330/15]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): It has not been possible in the time available to compile the information requested. The information will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Garda Remuneration

105. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will confirm that there will be no changes to the current payment system for retired members of An Garda Síochána; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17901/15]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): To date no proposals have been agreed to change the process by which retired members of An Garda Síochána are paid their pension from the current method of payment in advance. I can, however, state that consideration of this matter is at an exploratory stage.

Garda Operations

106. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will report on the Garda Síochána Operation Obair; the number of persons arrested and charged under this operation to date; the number of successful convictions to date; and if this operation is still active. [18001/15]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I am informed by the Garda authorities that Operation Obair was launched in each Division in the Eastern Garda Region in April 2012. The primary objective of Operation Obair is to disrupt and prevent mobile and organised criminal groups from committing criminal offences, to apprehend suspects in the commission or the attempted commission of offences and to fully investigate, detect and, where possible, prosecute any offences outstanding against these suspects.

I am further informed that Operation Obair is one of a number of specific burglary related operations which have been implemented in each Garda Region, in support of Operation Fiacla, to target suspect offenders, disrupt their activities and secure their attendance before the courts. The Operation provides both a preventative and detection element, and focuses on geographical areas and specific targets. Targeted offences include; burglary, aggravated burglary, robbery, possession of house breaking implements, possession of stolen property and trespassing.

I am advised that, as of 30 April 2015, Operation Fiacla has led to the arrest of 13,027 persons with charges being brought against 7,394 persons nationally. I am further advised that An Garda Síochána is not in a position to provide the specific information requested by the Deputy in relation to Operation Obair as this would require a disproportionate amount of Garda time

and resources to collate.

As the Deputy will be aware, I have also been carrying out a broad review of the criminal justice system's response to the problem of burglaries. This includes a focus on interagency measures in relation to the management of prolific offenders, visible policing, crime prevention support for communities, and an examination of legislative issues. In this regard I recently published the General Scheme of the Criminal Justice (Burglary of Dwellings) Bill which was approved by Government. This legislation targets repeat burglary offenders through bail measures and provisions concerning the imposition of consecutive sentencing for repeat burglary offending.

Garda Strength

107. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will provide a detailed breakdown of the most up-to-date number of gardaí in each district in the Dublin metropolitan area, in each year since 2011. [18002/15]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): As the Deputy will appreciate, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the distribution of personnel among the Garda Regions, Divisions, and Districts. Garda management keep this distribution under continuing review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities so as to ensure that the best possible use is made of these resources.

I have received the information from the Garda Commissioner on the personnel strength for each Division and District in the Dublin Metropolitan Region for the years ending 31 December 2011-2014 and on 31 March 2015, the latest date for which figures are readily available. I have arranged that this information which is set out in spreadsheets be sent to the Deputy directly.

Court Procedures

108. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality further to Parliamentary Question No. 126 of 20 April 2015, if she will take steps to enforce the relevant provision in the Judicial Separation and Family Law Reform Act 1984 in order to ensure that judges, barristers and solicitors do not wear wigs and gowns in the family court proceedings. [18062/15]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): As the Deputy will be aware, the Courts are, subject only to the constitution and the law, independent in the exercise of their judicial functions. The presiding judge is responsible for the administration of his or her court. The conduct of any court case, including adherence to the provisions of the Judicial Separation and Family Law Reform Act 1989 is a matter for the presiding judge.

Visa Data

109. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of visas required by English language students currently registered in IBAT College, Dublin [18067/15]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I am informed that as of 30 April 2015 the college referred to by the Deputy had 364 non-EEA students registered with the Garda National Immigration Bureau as pursuing an English language course of studies.

Criminal Law

110. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason for the delay in making a decision in respect of a mutual assistance request relating to a prosecution (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18083/15]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): My Department is obliged to deal in confidence with requests for mutual legal assistance in criminal investigations. However, given that reference has been made in a court in Northern Ireland to the making of a request for assistance in this instance, I can confirm that a request has been received and that it is being dealt with, in accordance with legal requirements, as expeditiously as possible. I am not in a position to make any further comment in relation to this particular matter.

Garda Deployment

111. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will support the placement of community gardaí in areas with high incidences of anti-social behaviour (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18092/15]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I can inform the Deputy that it is the policy of An Garda Síochána to deploy personnel to establish a highly visible and accessible service to communities to tackle crime, the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour. Community policing is a central feature and core value of policing policy and current policing strategies are predicated on the prevention of crime, public order offences and anti-social behaviour. In this regard local Community Gardaí engage with residents, businesses and schools and address any issues that arise.

As the Deputy will be aware the deployment of policing resources is a matter for the Garda Commissioner, I have, however, requested a report from the Garda authorities in relation to the specific matter referred to and I will contact the Deputy directly as soon as the report is to hand.

Garda Operations

112. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her views on correspondence (details supplied) regarding the right of persons with visual impairment to have access to pedestrian pavements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18093/15]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The Deputy will appreciate that I have no direct role in operational road traffic enforcement which is principally a matter for An Garda Síochána. I can, however, assure the Deputy that one of An Garda Síochána's strategic objectives is to provide a safe environment for all road users, including pedestrians, and I have brought the Deputy's particular concerns regarding parking on footpaths at the locations in question to the attention of the Garda authorities.

Closed Circuit Television Systems

113. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will provide an update on when the new closed-circuit television camera scheme promised for the general Finglas area in Dublin 11 will be installed, and become operational. [18096/15]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): CCTV systems installed for the purposes of crime prevention and as aids to policing in areas to which the general public routinely have access, such as town centres, fall into two distinct categories: Garda CCTV systems and community-based CCTV systems.

A community-based CCTV Scheme was launched in 2005. This scheme provided financial assistance to qualifying local organisations towards meeting the capital costs associated with the establishment of a local community CCTV system. Two major rounds of funding were advertised under that scheme. I am advised by Pobal, who administered the scheme on behalf of my Department, that no applications were received under the two previous rounds of funding under the Community Scheme for the Finglas area.

The current position is that all available funding provided under the previous two rounds has been fully allocated and there are currently no plans to further extend the Scheme. However, the matter will continue to be kept under ongoing review in the context of overall policy considerations and the availability of funding.

Garda CCTV systems are planned and implemented on the basis of An Garda Síochána's identified operational needs and priorities. Accordingly, decisions in relation to the introduction or extension of such systems are a matter for the Garda Commissioner. I am advised by the Garda authorities that current Garda CCTV arrangements are kept under ongoing review in the context of An Garda Síochána's operational requirements.

In that context, I am advised by the Garda authorities that proposals to extend the existing Garda CCTV system in Finglas are currently being examined.

Public Sector Staff Increments

114. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under her remit per year since 2008. [18335/15]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): It is not possible to disaggregate the cost of increments from the overall pay bill. However, I can inform the Deputy that the number of increments awarded to staff of my Department is set out as follows:

Year	Number of staff in receipt of an increment
2008	1523
2009	1597
2010	1335
2011	1191
2012	1069
2013	913
2014	655
2015 (to date)	191

As the Deputy will be aware, increments are awarded subject to satisfactory performance and attendance.

Inter-Country Adoptions

115. **Deputy Ciara Conway** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the position regarding an adoption agreement between Ireland and Russia; the progress that has been made on the issue to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17943/15]

116. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs when it is expected that a bilateral deal will be concluded with Russia in respect of the adoption of children to Ireland from that country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18081/15]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy James Reilly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 115 and 116 together.

Efforts are ongoing in my Department in relation to a bilateral agreement on intercountry adoption between Ireland and the Russian Federation. It was intended to visit Russia in January of this year. However it has been decided to liaise with officials in the Ministry of Education and Science in Russia to ensure that Irish proposals in regard the provision of post placement reports are acceptable to the Russian Federation.

The Irish Constitution protects the integrity of family life and that once adopted in Ireland the child is treated in the same way as other Irish children. This means that the ability of the State to intervene in a family, when a child's welfare and protection is not compromised, is limited. The Department has advised the Russian Federation of this Constitutional imperative in instances where families, who had given commitments to the Russian authorities in regard to the provision of post placement reports, fail to adhere to those commitments. In these instances the State has no legislative power to enforce compliance with the commitments given by Irish families, legal or otherwise, to provide post placement reports. It is imperative that this matter is fully addressed so as to ensure that further discussions on other aspects of the bilateral agreement are beneficial.

Public Sector Staff Increments

117. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under his remit per year since 2008. [18328/15]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy James Reilly): Figures for the cost to the Exchequer of payment of increments to staff within my Department since its establishment in 2011 are currently being compiled and will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as they become available.

As the costs in respect of agencies under the auspices of my Department are not routinely compiled by my Department, I have requested that the agencies supply the requested information directly to the Deputy. As the Child and Family Agency was established in January 2014, it will only be in a position to supply the Deputy with the information with effect from that date.

Hospital Appointments Status

118. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) may expect to be provided with necessary treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17905/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The scheduling of appointments for patients is a matter for the hospital to which the patient has been referred. Should a patient's general practitioner consider that the patient's condition warrants an earlier appointment, he or she should take the matter up with the consultant and the hospital involved. In relation to the specific case raised, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and my officials will follow the matter up.

Health Services Staff Remuneration

119. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Health the steps he will take to address a Labour Court agreement in respect of €7.5 million owed to 400 social care workers in counties Galway and Roscommon in twilight premium time payments, which extends over an eight-year period and which is not being honoured due to the Health Service Executive pleading inability to pay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17959/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The HSE has advised that following a national engagement with staff representatives, agreement was made by the HSE to pay unsocial hours to designated staff.

This payment commenced on 1 January 2015 and no agreement was made in relation to arrears.

Currently the issue of a backdated claim for arrears is being reviewed by the State's industrial relations processes and the claim is currently before the Labour Relations Commission.

Dental Services Provision

120. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the dental treatments that are provided for under the free dental scheme for low-income families who have a general medical services card; and if he will provide an update on the matter. [18021/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): The Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) provides access to dental treatment for adult medical card holders. The service is provided by contracted dentists. The HSE prioritises for treatment patients with special needs, high risk patients and those who have greater clinical needs. A free oral examination every calendar year and free emergency dental treatment with a focus on relief of pain and sepsis are available to all eligible patients, regardless of their medical condition. This includes 2 fillings per year, all extractions, including surgical extractions, and a number of complex treatments.

Hospitals Expenditure

121. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl** asked the Minister for Health the amount paid to a company (details supplied) in Dublin 6 for transport services in each of the past three years; the

amount estimated that will be paid in respect of transport services at a hospital for the next 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17904/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Deputy's question relates to service delivery matters and accordingly I have asked the HSE to respond directly to him.

If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Hospital Waiting Lists

122. **Deputy Timmy Dooley** asked the Minister for Health the reason that, although a person (details supplied) in County Clare was told in July 2014 that he would have bypass surgery in September 2014, the person continued to wait for the surgery and passed away in April 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17907/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Firstly, I would like to extend my sympathies to the family of the person concerned.

As this is a service matter I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly on the matter. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and my officials will follow the matter up.

Hospital Staff

123. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Health the action being taken to ensure that staffing levels and staffing arrangements are adequate in the acute psychiatric unit at Roscommon County Hospital in order that patients can be assured of safe care; if he is satisfied that the care, staffing and staffing arrangements at present are adequate, in view of the tragic passing of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17909/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): As this is a service issue this question has been referred to the HSE for direct reply. If you have not received a reply within 15 working days please contact my private office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Medical Card Applications

124. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Health if he will examine and expedite an application for a medical card in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry, in view of the fact that all the necessary documentation has been submitted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17913/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): 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 es-

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.

If the Deputy has not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days, please contact my Private Office who will follow up the matter with them.

Medical Card Eligibility

125. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health if he will confirm that the medical card guidelines require the primary care reimbursement service to take account of a person's distance from medical care, particularly for chronic conditions; if he will confirm that in each individual case, transport and medical costs associated with ongoing care are taken into consideration when assessing an applicant for a medical card on discretionary grounds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17919/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): 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.

If the Deputy has not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days, please contact my Private Office who will follow up the matter with them.

Hospital Staff Data

126. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide the number and medical specialty and cost of locums for each acute hospital since 2013; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17926/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Public Sector Pensions

127. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an explanation of the workings of cost-neutral retirement pension schemes for nurses; if persons who took such an option have the option to seek a review of their pension entitlements or if they can alter their entitlements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17932/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In 2005, the Minister for Finance introduced cost neutral early retirement (CNER) for the public service. Subject to eligibility, the scheme was made available to eligible public servants aged 50/55 years or over (subject to preserved pension age). This facility allows public servants to retire with immediate payment of pension

benefits subject to an actuarial reduction to take account of the longer period over which the pension would be paid.

There is no specific CNER scheme for Nurses. Should a retiree (either CNER or otherwise) have a query regarding their pension entitlements or calculations they should contact the Pension Unit of their former employer in the first instance.

I have asked the HSE to forward the relevant CNER Circulars to the Deputy for his information.

Public Sector Pensions

128. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if a nurse who retired early due to difficulties in the workplace in 2014 but did not disclose this at the time of retirement has the option of having his or her pension circumstances reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17933/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Medical Card Applications

129. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Health if he will examine and expedite an application for a medical card in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry, in view of the fact the person has submitted all relevant information; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17935/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): 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.

If the Deputy has not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days, please contact my Private Office who will follow up the matter with them.

Health Insurance Community Rating

130. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the lifetime community rating (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17939/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Taking out health insurance is optional. Anyone ordinarily resident in the country is entitled, subject to certain charges, to receive public in-patient and out-patient hospital services. People who do not take out health insurance

continue to have the same entitlement to services in the public hospital system.

Community rating, reflecting the principle of intergenerational solidarity, is a fundamental cornerstone of the health insurance system. This means that people who are old or sick do not have to pay more than the young and well. Under community rating, the level of risk that a particular consumer poses to an insurer does not directly affect the premium paid. Premiums for younger or healthier lives are typically higher than their expected claims would require, whereas for older or less healthy lives, premiums are typically lower than the expected claims would require.

For Community Rating to work we depend on adequate numbers of younger people taking out health insurance to help keep premium prices down for everybody. Lifetime Community Rating is being introduced to encourage people to take out health insurance at a younger age, thereby helping to spread the costs of older and less healthy people across society, to support affordable community-rated premiums for everyone who wishes to purchase insurance. It is a necessary measure to help support the viability of community rating within our system of health insurance.

It is worth clarifying that those who do not wish to avail of private health insurance will not face a financial penalty. They retain their full entitlement to use of public hospital services. Under Lifetime Community Rating, those who decide to take out health insurance later in life will face an added premium compared to those who have subscribed over a longer period. I am satisfied that this measure is fully justified for the purposes of maintaining a stable insurance market which provides equity of treatment between young and old.

Health Services Provision

131. **Deputy Dinny McGinley** asked the Minister for Health when it is proposed to restore the rheumatology outreach clinic in Letterkenny General Hospital in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17944/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and my officials will follow the matter up.

Health Services Provision

132. **Deputy Liam Twomey** asked the Minister for Health when a charger for a spinal implant will be supplied in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Wexford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17947/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): As the particular issue raised relates to an individual case, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the HSE for direct reply to you. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Medical Card Applications

133. **Deputy Áine Collins** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding an application for an emergency medical card in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork

[17953/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): 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. If the Deputy has not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days, please contact my Private Office who will follow up the matter with them.

HSE Staff Remuneration

134. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Health if he will liaise with the Health Service Executive to ascertain if a person (details supplied) in County Cavan is entitled to a pension in respect of that person's employment over a 14-year period with the old health board; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17955/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

General Practitioner Data

135. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Health the number of general practitioners who are in receipt of an allowance (details supplied); who have made a legal challenge for entitlement to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17956/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): As the information requested by the Deputy relates to service issues and is not routinely provided to my Department, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply directly to the Deputy on these matters. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Hospital Appointments Status

136. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 201 of 12 March 2015, when it is envisaged that a patient (details supplied) in County Clare will undergo a procedure, in view of the fact that the person has been classified as an urgent clinical priority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17957/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I refer the Deputy to my answer of 5 March and 12 March and to the response issued by the HSE on 10 March, which noted that the hospital concerned has a policy for the management of scheduled inpatient care based on clinical prioritisation as indicated by the admitting Consultant specialist at the time of consultation. This is in line with HSE best practice. I also note that the HSE has highlighted that, depending on the specialty involved, the inpatient waiting time can vary and can also be impacted by unscheduled care, which is emergency driven and unpredictable in nature.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

Health Services Staff Remuneration

137. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Health the steps he will take with the Health Service Executive to ensure that moneys in the sum of €7.5 million owed to social care workers in counties Galway and Roscommon in respect of twilight premium time payments, and which have been confirmed by the Labour Court as being properly due and owing over the past eight years, will be paid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17960/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The HSE has advised that following a national engagement with staff representatives, agreement was made by the HSE to pay unsocial hours to designated staff.

This payment commenced on 1 January 2015 and no agreement was made in relation to arrears.

Currently the issue of a backdated claim for arrears is being reviewed by the State's industrial relations processes and the claim is currently before the Labour Relations Commission.

Medical Card Applications

138. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail** asked the Minister for Health if he will expedite an application for a Medical Card in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17970/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): 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. If the Deputy has not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days, please contact my Private Office who will follow up the matter with them.

Health Services Provision

139. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Health if there is a specific protocol in place within the Health Service Executive to provide extra support to recently bereaved spouses and their dependent children in cases where they are already in receipt of medical, disability or respite supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17973/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): As the Deputy's question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy. If the Deputy has not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days, he can contact my Private Office and they will

follow the matter up with the HSE.

Orthodontic Services Provision

140. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding orthodontic braces in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17974/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Hospital Appointments Status

141. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Cork will be provided an appointment to treat a spinal injury; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17976/15]

165. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Cork will receive an appointment for eye treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18018/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 141 and 165 together.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The scheduling of appointments for patients is a matter for the hospital to which the patient has been referred. Should a patient's general practitioner consider that the patient's condition warrants an earlier appointment, he or she should take the matter up with the consultant and the hospital involved. In relation to the specific cases raised, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and my officials will follow the matter up.

Dental Services

142. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the removal of amalgam fillings for dental cavities, which have mercury in the debris of these fillings, which is found to be harmful if it leeches into the gums; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17978/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): The Minamata Convention on Mercury - a globally binding agreement on mercury was concluded in January 2013. This agreement was introduced for environmental reasons. Among the key points agreed is a phase-down of the use of dental fillings containing mercury amalgam taking into account the domestic circumstances of individual countries. The need to ensure environmentally sound

storage and final disposal of the product was also agreed.

The detail of the phase-down of the use of mercury in dental fillings in Ireland is being considered and planned. There are no plans to remove existing dental amalgam fillings. Consideration is being given to the use of alternative materials in new fillings.

Medical Card Applications

143. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if a medical card will issue in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare, despite that person being refused and assigned a general practitioner visit card only, in view of the fact that the person receives a disability payment and the person's spouse has a full medical card; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17980/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): 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. If the Deputy has not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days, please contact my Private Office who will follow up the matter with them.

Nursing Homes Support Scheme Data

144. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the amount of the €44 million allocated to the fair deal nursing home scheme that has been distributed; and to which regions. [17991/15]

145. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the amount of the €44 million allocated to the fair deal nursing home scheme that has been distributed to the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Hospitals Group. [17992/15]

146. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the amount of the new funding allocated to the fair deal nursing home scheme that has been allocated to each of the five hospitals in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Hospitals Group. [17993/15]

147. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the number of additional fair deal beds that have been opened since his announcement of €44 million additional funding. [17994/15]

148. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the number of additional fair deal beds that have been opened in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Hospitals Group since his announcement of €44 million additional funding. [17995/15]

149. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the number of additional fair deal beds that have been opened in each of the five hospitals that make up the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Hospitals Group since his announcement of €44 million additional funding. [17996/15]

150. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the current waiting time for ap-

proved applicants in each of the five hospitals that make up the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Hospitals Group since his announcement of €44 million additional funding. [17997/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): I propose to take Questions Nos. 144 to 150, inclusive, together.

As these are service matters they have been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Medicinal Products Availability

151. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health when he will publish the report into the public consultation on whether to make a number of prescription-only medicines used in emergency situations more widely available, including EpiPens, which are used to treat allergic shock; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17998/15]

152. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health when he will conclude his review into the possible wider availability of a number of prescription-only medicines used in emergency situations more widely available, including EpiPens, which are used to treat allergic shock; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17999/15]

153. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health when he will bring forward recommendations on the wider availability of a number of prescription-only medicines used in emergency situations more widely available, including EpiPens, which are used to treat allergic shock; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18000/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 151 to 153, inclusive, together.

I launched a public consultation process on the wider availability of a number of prescription-only medicines used in emergency situations on 20 February. The consultation forms part of a wider review which aims to explore the feasibility of setting up a system to allow appropriately trained non-medical persons to have ready access to certain prescription-only medicines for use in emergency situations, while ensuring that medicines continue to be controlled in an appropriate manner. The medicines under consideration are adrenaline, salbutamol, glucagon, naloxone and glyceryl trinitrate.

Members of the public and other stakeholders were asked to respond to the consultation by mid-March. Submissions have been received from a wide variety of respondents and analysis of these responses is under way. My Department has also consulted with a number of health care organisations and agencies to ensure that the various options for extending the availability of certain prescription-only medicines for use in emergency situations are fully explored. The outcome of these discussions and feedback from the public consultation are currently being considered. I expect to receive a report and policy recommendations shortly. I will then consider the report and make a policy decision on the best way to proceed. The report of the consultation will be made available on my Department's website once this process is complete.

Mental Health Services Provision

154. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health if he will report, of the additional 1,150 posts in mental health services that were approved over the past number of

years, the number of actual posts filled; and when the outstanding posts will be filled [18003/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): This Government has provided an additional €125 million and some 1,150 posts for mental health, since 2012. The funding is being used to strengthen Community Mental Health Teams for both adults and children, to enhance specialist community mental health services for older people with a mental illness, those with an intellectual disability and mental illness, forensic mental health services, and to enhance access to counselling and psychotherapy in primary care and investment in suicide prevention measures. The additional funding is enabling the HSE to recruit staff who are more suited to the development of a community-focused Mental Health Service and has provided for a required change in the mix of staff, in particular allied health professionals, across Community Mental Health Teams, in line with *A Vision for Change*.

As at 17th April 2015, 397.5 or 95.5% of the 416 posts approved for 2012 and 405.5 or 85% of the 477 posts approved for 2013 have been filled. Of the 250 posts allocated in 2014, 50 have started and a further 70.5 are at various stages in the recruitment process.

There are some difficulties in identifying some outstanding candidates, for geographic and qualification reasons. The HSE Mental Health Division is acutely aware of the need to focus on recruitment of frontline staff and is working closely with the Human Resources and the National Recruitment Service to address difficulties attracting candidates to particular parts of the country. A number of national and international recruitment campaigns are under way currently for medical consultant posts, senior and staff nurses as well as a range of required allied health professionals and support staff to deliver a multidisciplinary based Mental Health Service. Every effort is being made to fill the remainder of the approved posts as quickly as possible.

Drugs Payment Scheme

155. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health the cost of reducing the drugs payment scheme from €144 per month to €130 per month. [18004/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): The cost of reducing the Drugs Payment Scheme from €144 per month to €130 per month is estimated to be in the region of €8m to €12m per annum. It should be noted that data is generally not available to the Health Service Executive (HSE) regarding family expenditure on drugs and medicines where the amounts are below €144 in a month and hence it is not possible to provide a more precise estimate.

Health Care Professionals

156. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to introduce legislation to regulate the counselling and psychotherapy profession; his plans to legislate for a minimum education requirement - level 8 - on the national framework of qualifications, for example; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18005/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Psychotherapists and counsellors are not currently regulated under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005. However, the Act provides that the Minister for Health may, under section 4(2), designate a health and social care profession not already designated if he or she considers that it is in the public interest to do so and if specified criteria have been met.

My predecessor, Minister James Reilly T.D, wrote to the Health and Social Care Professionals Council last year seeking advice on the question of specifically designating counsellors and psychotherapists under the 2005 Act.

A number of issues require clarification and there are varying views among the professional bodies representing counsellors and psychotherapists in Ireland. The main questions to be resolved include whether counselling and psychotherapy should be treated as one or two professions for the purposes of regulation, the title or titles of the profession(s) to be protected, and the minimum qualifications that would be required of applicants for registration. The readiness and compatibility of the professions for designation under the 2005 Act also need to be determined.

The Council's detailed report on the matter has been received in recent weeks and is being examined carefully in the Department with a view to deciding the next steps which, I envisage, will include a wider round of consultation involving the various professional bodies and other interested parties.

Hospital Investigations

157. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the number of X-rays and scans that were reviewed in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, County Louth, as a result of the discovery of errors in the analysis of three locum radiologists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18007/15]

158. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health in respect of the X-rays and scans that were reviewed in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, County Louth, as a result of the discovery of errors in the analysis of three locum radiologists, the period of time during which these errors occurred. [18008/15]

159. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health in view of the X-rays and scans that were reviewed in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, County Louth, as a result of the discovery of errors in the analysis of three locum radiologists, the steps that have been taken to informing the patients affected. [18009/15]

160. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health in view of the X-rays and scans that were reviewed in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, County Louth, as a result of the discovery of errors in the analysis of three locum radiologists, the supports that have been put in place for patients and their families affected by this problem. [18010/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 157 to 160, inclusive, together.

In relation to the detailed queries raised by the Deputy, as these are service matters, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and my officials will follow the matter up.

Hospital Services

161. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health if he is satisfied that the quality assurance and control processes are sufficient to provide public confidence when X-rays and scans are taken. [18011/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As Minister for Health I believe that every

individual who uses our health services is entitled to expect and receive care of the highest standard and to be treated in an atmosphere of safety and care.

In 2012, the Faculty of Radiology launched their national Quality Assurance Programme in Radiology (NQAPR). In outlining the importance of such quality assurance structures and functions, the Faculty explained that “like many diagnostic services that involved decision making under conditions of uncertainty, a certain degree of error is inevitable”. The challenge to every system internationally is to ensure systems are put in place to mitigate risk, minimise the degree of error and provide assurance around the services provided.

The process of audit is built into radiology practice. Peer review occurs continuously: radiologists review older images when reporting on new images. In addition, radiology departments partake in multidisciplinary team meetings, where images are reviewed by teams who decide on the treatment a patient should receive. In line with the recommendations of the NQAPR, many departments hold discrepancy meetings, with open discussion of cases where reports appear to be inaccurate. Such meetings facilitate collective learning, improving patient safety. Prospective double reporting is where a consultant radiologist seeks a second opinion from another consultant radiologist within his or her department on a particular case prior to authorisation.

Radiological services will be improved through the implementation of Hospital Groups. Within Groups, a networked approach will be adopted, allowing the major centres to direct and manage services. This will ensure that appropriate and enhanced governance and staffing arrangements are in place. The full implementation of the National Integrated Medical Imaging System (NIMIS) which provides filmless imaging data and enhances the secure and rapid movement of patient image data throughout the health service including across hospitals within Hospital Groups is continuing to enhance radiological services nationally.

Finally, new structures have been created in the HSE and in my Department to advance patient safety and clinical effectiveness. The creation of a Quality Improvement Division within the HSE and the Clinical Programmes set up between the HSE and the RCPI, have greatly enhanced our governance and capacity for ensuring robust quality and risk frameworks, developing models of best practice in clinical care. The establishment and strengthening of the Clinical Effectiveness Unit in my Department has been fundamental to reducing risk and improving the performance of our health system. I fully support this clinical effectiveness agenda. It is vital that Ireland has a suite of quality assured National Clinical Guidelines and National Clinical Audit in place. These are standards for patient care and treatments set out by leading clinicians in the health service.

Hospital Services

162. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the current status of the integrated medical imaging system; the number of hospitals that are part of this system; the number that are not part of this system; the timeframe within which he expects all hospitals to be part of this system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18012/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Health Services Staff Data

163. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the number of agency staff currently employed in the health service, and specifically in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, County Louth. [18013/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Health Services Staff Data

164. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the number of agency staff who are employed in the emergency department of Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, County Louth. [18014/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Question No. 165 answered with Question No. 141.

Medical Card Reviews

166. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Health if he will review a refusal of an application for a medical card in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; if he will approve a discretionary card in view of the person's circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18023/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): 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. If the Deputy has not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days, please contact my Private Office who will follow up the matter with them.

Medical Aids and Appliances Applications

167. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Health if he will examine an application and allow for a continuous glucose monitor in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18026/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): As the particular issue raised relates to an individual case, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the HSE for direct reply to you. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Assisted Human Reproduction

168. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Health the status of legislation relating to infertility; if the heads of the Bill have been agreed; if the Bill will examine governance of the sector; if medical card patients may be accommodated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18030/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In February of this year I received Government approval to draft the General Scheme of a Bill for assisted human reproduction, which will include provisions relating to numerous different aspects from the beginning to the end of the assisted human reproduction process. There will be a number of provisions relating to the establishment of an independent regulatory authority to monitor compliance with the law.

Following the completion of the draft General Scheme (by the end of 2015), I intend to submit the Scheme to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children for pre-legislative scrutiny. In addition, my Department will conduct a widespread consultation on the draft General Scheme during which stakeholders and members of the public will be invited to share their views.

As I have previously stated it is currently not the case that the public funding of fertility treatments will be included as part of these provisions. While I would favour public funding of fertility treatments in principle there are many other pressing funding demands on the health service at this time.

Although in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment is not provided by the Irish public health service, there is some support available in that patients who access IVF treatment privately may claim tax relief on the costs involved under the tax relief for medical expenses scheme. In addition, a defined list of fertility medicines needed for fertility treatment is covered under the High Tech Scheme administered by the Health Service Executive (HSE). Medicines covered by the High Tech Scheme must be prescribed by a consultant/specialist and approved by the HSE 'High Tech Liaison Officers'. The cost of the medicines is then covered, as appropriate, under the Medical Card or Drugs Payment Scheme.

Mental Health Services Provision

169. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Health the plans to establish an acute mental health unit at Wexford General Hospital prior to the change of Government in 2011; if so, the results of that plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18032/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): As this is a service issue this question has been referred to the HSE for direct reply. If you have not received a reply within 15 working days please contact my private office and they will follow up the matter with them.

Nursing Home Inspections

170. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Health if the Health Service Executive is sufficiently funded to implement its plans to bring the 21 nursing homes that were identified by the Health and Information Quality Authority as having major non-compliance issues up to the regulations and standards applied to all designated centres, thus avoiding sanctions being imposed by the authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18049/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): The Health Service Executive has been working with the Health Information and Quality Authority over the past number of months to meet the re-registration requirements of a number of public residential facilities. These discussions are ongoing and there is adequate flexibility available within the terms of existing legislative provisions, and through ongoing discussions between the HSE and HIQA, for solutions to be found.

The objective of the Department and the HSE is to ensure that the funds that are made available are applied in the most effective way possible and that residents continue to receive the high standard of care that they need.

National Lottery Funding Applications

171. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when a decision will be made on an application to the Department's 2015 national-lottery funded schemes; the total funding available under the programme for 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18082/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department administers a National Lottery Discretionary Fund from which once-off grants are paid to community and voluntary organisations providing a range of health related services. Funding in 2015 amounts to €3.286 million.

My Department has received a large number of applications under the National Lottery Discretionary Fund which are currently being processed. All applicants will be informed of the outcome of the application as soon as a decision has been made.

National Lottery Funding Applications

172. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Health his views regarding the supports that may be provided to support a capital project for a group (details supplied), which has raised almost €300,000 to develop a permanent home for the group. [18086/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department administers a National Lottery Discretionary Fund from which once-off grants are paid to community and voluntary organisations providing a range of health related services. Funding in 2015 amounts to €3.286 million.

My Department has received a large number of applications under the National Lottery Discretionary Fund which are currently being processed. As most of these applications were only received at the end of last week I cannot yet say if an application has been received from Remember Us for 2015. However, all applicants will be informed of the outcome of the application as soon as a decision has been made.

Remember Us applied to my Department for funding towards this project in 2014. I awarded a grant of €10,000 which was paid to them in July 2014.

Local Drugs Task Forces Review Report

173. **Deputy Michael Conaghan** asked the Minister for Health the number of the 15 rec-

ommendations of the 2012 Report on the Review of Drugs Task Forces and the National Structures Under Which They Operate that have been implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18089/15]

174. **Deputy Michael Conaghan** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on a merger of two organisations (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18090/15]

175. **Deputy Michael Conaghan** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on a matter (details supplied) regarding local drugs task forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18091/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 173 to 175, inclusive, together.

As the Deputy will be aware, the conclusions of a review of the future direction and role of Drugs Task Forces and the national structures that underpin the general drugs area were announced in December 2012. The review recommended a series of changes to better equip the Task Forces to respond to the current pattern of substance misuse. In line with the recommendations, the role of the Task Forces has been extended to tackle alcohol misuse and a National Coordinating Committee has been established to guide the work of the Task Forces and drive implementation of the National Drugs Strategy.

The National Coordinating Committee is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the recommendations. Of the 15 recommendations, 11 have been fully implemented. I have asked my Department to provide the Deputy with a full report on the status of each recommendation. In relation to the recommendation on boundary changes it is intended to consult with the Task Forces concerned by these proposals before introducing any changes to catchment areas.

Public Sector Staff Increments

176. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under his remit per year since 2008. [18334/15]

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In relation to the part of the question relevant to the HSE, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter. If you have not received a reply from the HSE within 15 working days please contact my Private Office and they will follow up the matter with them.

The information sought in respect of Non-Commercial State Agencies under the aegis of my Department is currently being collated and will be forwarded directly to the Deputy as soon as it is available.

Public Sector Staff Increments

177. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under his remit per year since 2008. [18333/15]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Details of incre-

ments for the years 2008 - 2015 set out in the table. The numbers for 2015 cover the period up to 30th April 2015.

YEAR	NUMBER OF INCREMENTS	VALUE OF INCREMENTS
2008	761	679,396
2009	739	608,755
2010	694	585,911
2011	630	630,105
2012	533	486,841
2013	447	393,135
2014	305	293,746
2015	126	210,994

Schools Building Projects Applications

178. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will expedite an application for emergency work at a school (details supplied) in County Mayo in view of the delay in dealing with the application to date; the necessity of the works for a specific student; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17906/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that funding has been approved for universal access works at the school in question and the school authority has been notified.

Special Educational Needs Staff

179. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding a request for a special needs assistant in respect of a child (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17911/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): I wish to advise the Deputy that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible, through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) for allocating a quantum of Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support for each school annually taking into account the assessed care needs of children qualifying for SNA support enrolled in the school. Where children have significant care needs whereby they may need additional support to be able to attend school, the NCSE may make an allocation of SNA support to the school to assist that child. The NCSE operates within my Department’s criteria in allocating such support. The criteria by which SNA support is allocated to pupils is set out in my Department’s Circular 0030/2014. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated. It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised. All schools have been asked to apply to the NCSE for SNA support for the 2015/16 school year by 18th March, 2015. The NCSE will consider all applications for SNA support which have been made by schools, including the school referred to by the Deputy. Schools will be advised of their revised SNA allocations for the 2015/16 school year, prior to the end of the current school year.

All schools have the names and contact details of their local SENO. Parents may also con-

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tact their local SENO directly to discuss their child's special educational needs, using the contact details available on www.ncse.ie. As the Deputy's question relates to the consideration of an the SNA allocation by the NCSE to an individual, I have referred this question to the NCSE for their consideration and direct reply to the Deputy.

Education Policy

180. **Deputy Jonathan O'Brien** asked the Minister for Education and Skills further to Parliamentary Question No. 219 of 24 June 2014, if she will provide in tabular form the number of derogations to the five-year secondment limit that have been decided by her Department; the posts in question; the reason for the derogation; the date the decision to derogate was made; and the details of any input that she or Oireachtas Members had in each case. [17912/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): My Department, through the teacher support services and education centres, engages teachers on a full time basis annually for the provision of continuing professional development (CPD) through secondment from their schools. These secondments are subject to annual review. The arrangements provide flexibility and ensure that the in-service needs of teachers and other support priorities of the school system can be met within the resources available.

Having teachers with relevant and recent teaching experience and expertise is a key requirement for the role. It is a condition therefore that the maximum length of time that a teacher may be on secondment is five years, following which they return to their teaching roles within their schools. In this way, their expertise and knowledge is not lost to the system. These teacher secondment arrangements were disseminated extensively so the necessary planning could take place at all levels including education centres, support services, school boards of management and individual teacher. The support services have engaged in succession planning as a key strategy in ensuring continued support for teachers and school leaders in implementing national education policy priorities and CPD and which allows for continuity, quality planning and management.

An alleviation of the application of the five year limit, up to 10% of the posts where required, has been agreed to allow secondees to serve for a further limited period. My officials consulted with the support services to determine the exemptions to apply in 2015/16. It is Department policy to apply the alleviation to positions where seconded teachers take on leadership roles or have a specialism or expertise where retention is necessary for continuity, quality planning and management.

The implementation of this policy is a matter for the services concerned and the relevant section of my Department.

The detail of the number of derogated posts for each support service will be supplied to the Deputy directly.

Home Tuition Scheme

181. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her plans to provide extra additional educational supports, such as home tuition, for a certain category of students (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17924/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): My Department administers

a Home Tuition Scheme which provides a compensatory educational service for children who, for a number of reasons including chronic illness such as Cystic Fibrosis, are unable to attend school or absent for a significant proportion of the school year and where the degree of absence is such that without supplementary instruction the pupil is unlikely to be able to perform academically at the level appropriate to his/her level of ability.

Circular 0048/2014 which details the eligibility criteria for the scheme is available on my Department's website at www.education.ie.

Education Schemes

182. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the allocation of grant aid for book rental schemes will be released, as announced in 2014. [17928/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): Budget 2014 provided funding of €5 million per annum for three years to support the establishment of book rental schemes in primary schools that did not operate such schemes. DEIS schools will receive €150 per child and non-DEIS schools will receive €100 per child in seed capital to establish book rental schemes.

The schools which qualified for funding under this scheme received 70% of their funding in 2014 and will receive the remaining 30% in May 2015. As previously announced primary schools that were operating book rental schemes prior to 2014 will also benefit from this funding. These schools will receive €18 per pupil in mainstream schools and €20 per pupil in DEIS schools over two year period or €7 or €8 per pupil in 2015 and €11 or €12 in 2016. This funding will also issue in May, Circular letter 0030/2015 advises schools of this funding and is available on my Departments website.

School Staff

183. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will assure parents of children at a school (details supplied) in County Donegal that they will not lose a teacher at this school; if she will support their case that the enrolment falls just two pupils short of the 115-pupil threshold required to retain the current team of five teachers. [17929/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): The criteria used for the allocation of teachers to schools is published annually on the Department's website. The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September. The staffing arrangements for the coming school year 2015/16 are set out in Circular 0005/2015 which is available on the website.

A staffing appeals process is available to schools under certain criteria. Details of the appeals criteria are set out in Circular 0005/2015. The next meeting of the Primary Staffing Appeals Board will take place later this month. The closing date for receipt of appeals for this meeting is Friday 8th May. The Primary Staffing Appeals Board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final.

School Staff

184. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will address the concerns raised in correspondence (details supplied) regarding the school transport scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17949/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Damien English): Bus Éireann operates the school transport scheme on behalf of the Department. This scheme has been in existence since 1967, and is based on accounting arrangements put in place in 1975. An investigation was launched by the Commission in 2007 after receiving a complaint that, among other activities, alleged unlawful State aid was being provided to Bus Éireann in respect of school transport services. The Commission's Decision found that the scheme was existing aid and for this reason was not unlawful at the time the complaint was made. The Commission Decision was not a ruling on the tendering arrangements in place between the Department of Education and Skills and Bus Éireann for the School Transport Scheme. However the Commission indicated that it would initiate dialogue with Ireland to agree on appropriate measures to ensure that the School Transport Scheme is compatible with the internal market in the future. The Department has commenced an informal dialogue with the Commission in this regard.

Home-School Liaison Scheme

185. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if her Department has changed its criteria for home school liaison officers (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17952/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme operates in Urban and Post Primary Schools included in DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), my Department's Action Plan for educational inclusion. Participating schools are allocated additional teaching posts through the assignment of HSCL Coordinators to individual schools or clusters of schools. Circular 0058/2013 "Assignment of HSCL Coordinators within DEIS schools" contains the most recent regulations and procedures participating schools must adhere to when making HSCL Coordinator assignments. The Circular replaces earlier Guidelines issued by my Department and was developed in consultation with relevant education partners to ensure, inter alia, an improved rotation for teachers between classroom teaching and HSCL Coordinator assignments.

School Enrolments

186. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if there is an impact on funding and the number of teachers allocated to a school by admitting a child that has not reached 12 years of age by 1 January of the enrolment year; and, if funding implications do exist, whether exceptions can be made. [17968/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): My Department calculates the staffing and grant allocations for primary and post primary schools on the basis of the total number of 'recognised' pupils enrolled in the school on 30th September of the previous year. The Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools define a "recognised pupil" as a pupil who is not less than 12 years of age on the 1st day of January of the school year; who as a rule has completed a full course of primary education; and who is following an approved course. A pupil who does not meet the definition of 'recognised pupil' is not normally counted for grant or teacher allocation purposes. However, consideration can be given to individual cases where, having regard to a student's circumstances, it may be educationally appropriate to do so.

Site Acquisitions

187. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills further to Parliamentary Question No. 731 of 15 April 2015, if she will provide a list of the schools referred to her in reply. [17987/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): As the Deputy may be aware, the Department of Education and Skills has worked in partnership with Fingal County Council under the Fingal School Model Agreement to acquire sites for educational provision in the Fingal area.

The Fingal Model Agreement was signed into effect in July 2006. It represented the first attempt at formalising the interactions between the Department and a local authority and was developed in advance of the Code of Practice for Planning Authorities on School Provision published jointly by the Minister for Education and Science and the Minister for the Environment in August 2008. A list of schools built on sites acquired under the Fingal Model Agreement is attached. Following on from the Code of Practice, in 2012 a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between my Department and the County and City Managers’ Association on the acquisition of sites for school planning purposes was agreed and signed. This MoU formalises the local authorities’ part in securing sites for educational use. In recent years, therefore, sites acquired in Fingal have been acquired under this MoU.

Schools Built on Sites Acquired under the Fingal Model Agreement

Site	School	Roll Number
Ongar Village, Fingal	Castaheany Educate Together NS	20186F
Ongar Village, Fingal	St Benedict’s N.S.	20231H
Kelly’s Bay, Skerries	Skerries Educate Together NS	20307O
Castlelands, Balbriggan	Gaelscoil Bhaile Brigín	20252P
Castlelands, Balbriggan	Bracken Educate Together	20282B
Castlelands, Balbriggan	Ardgillan Community College	76129H
Flemington, Balbriggan	Balbriggan Educate Together NS	20202A
Flemington, Balbriggan	Scoil Chormaic	20269J
Thornleigh, Swords	Thornleigh Educate Together NS	20302E
Oldtown, Swords	Gaelscoil Bhrian Bóroimhe	20095C
Oldtown, Swords	Swords Educate Together NS	20145O
Naul Rd., Balbriggan	St George’s N.S.	15315J
Tyrrelstown	Tyrrelstown Educate Together NS	20201V
Tyrrelstown	Scoil Naomh Lucais	16675V
Holywell, Swords	Holywell Educate Together NS	20348F
Porterstown/Kellystown	Scoil Choilm Community NS	20241K
Porterstown/Kellystown	Luttrelstown Community College	76130P
Hansfield	Hansfield ETNS	20383H
Hansfield	Hansfield ET Post Primary	76128F
Lusk	Rush and Lusk ETNS	20176C
Lusk	Lusk Community College	76213T
Phibblestown	Coláiste Pobail Setanta	76098W
Phibblestown	Scoil Ghráinne CNS	20247W
Donabate	Donabate CC	76104O

Site	School	Roll Number
Donabate	Donabate/Portrane ETNS	20161M

In addition, a development to provide primary and post primary accommodation on a site at Stephenstown, Balbriggan is planned.

Schools Building Projects Status

188. **Deputy Regina Doherty** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason a school (details supplied) in County Meath has, under the national school building programme, received funding to build a new extra classroom to allow for more places for children to be offered-allocated, but due to lack of funding, there is no teacher availability to teach the extra children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17988/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): The school referred to by the Deputy was approved a devolved grant in March 2013 to build four additional classrooms to cater for demographic growth. This project, when completed, will provide accommodation for a staffing level of 24 mainstream teachers in the school. The school is recognised as a 3-stream school by my Department i.e. with capacity for 24 mainstream classes. The school has been approved a developing teaching post from September 2015 based on its projected enrolment and will have 24 mainstream teachers when the developing post holder has been recruited.

I understand that the building project is currently under construction and that the accommodation is expected to be ready for occupation in September 2015.

School Placement

189. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when she will provide an update on the review of secondary school places for the Kildare South area; her plans to address the current shortage of places in the Newbridge area, County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18017/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): My Department is currently carrying out a nationwide demographic exercise to determine where additional post-primary school places might be needed from 2017 onwards. This includes an examination of the Kildare South area. On foot of this review, arrangements will be made to provide additional post-primary accommodation where this is needed. In the meantime, as previously advised, a building project to provide for additional post-primary school places in Newbridge is at tender stage.

School Funding

190. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if an increase of educational funding will be allocated to the areas of science and mathematics (details sup-

plied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18027/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): At primary level I have prioritized work in mathematics. At post primary, I have prioritised work in both mathematics and science. I will summarise the work that is currently in hand.

In fact, this year at primary level, the NCCA is developing draft components of a new Primary Mathematics curriculum for junior infants to 2nd class to support their consultation process in this area. Work on the review of primary science will happen at a later stage since the review of all aspects of the primary curriculum is being done on a phased basis.

In January this year, I launched the performance report on the 2014 National Assessments of English and Reading and Mathematics which was prepared by the Educational Research Centre. Their study of 8000 pupils in 150 primary schools found that overall performance in reading and mathematics in second and sixth classes was significantly higher than for the 2009 assessments. These are the first significant improvements in over 30 years. Such improvements are to be welcomed.

Significant system developments have been introduced in the primary school system to promote teaching and learning in Mathematics for boys and girls including standardised national assessments of reading and mathematics introduced in 2007. These now happen at 2nd, 4th and 6th classes; the National strategy to improve literacy and numeracy introduced in 2011 and School self-evaluation guidelines for primary schools published in 2012.

TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies) is a project of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). It is designed to assess the mathematics and science achievement of fourth class pupils. In 2011, Ireland took part in TIMSS for the first time since 1995.

There are many initiatives in place to promote interest in science and mathematics. Scoilnet is the Department of Education and Skills (DES) official portal for Irish education. The website is managed by Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) in Education on behalf of the DES. The Sci-Spy Initiative which is a section of this website is aimed at primary students in 5th and 6th classes.

Science Week Ireland is an annual event established to promote the relevance of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) in our everyday lives. It is coordinated by SFI Discover, the education-outreach programme of Science Foundation Ireland, who also help fund Engineers Week.

In relation to post-primary, Dr Travers, in his February report, recommended that implementation of Junior Cycle science be postponed from September 2015 to September 2016. Currently over 90% of students take Junior Cycle science. It is expected that the vast majority will continue to do so. A range of comprehensive continuing professional development (CPD) will be provided for teachers of junior cycle science through the dedicated JCT service.

The NCCA has provided me with new specifications for Leaving Certificate Physics, Chemistry and Biology. The NCCA has notified the Department that before the specifications are made available to all schools that it, working with the SEC and my Department, will trial, in particular the proposed new practical examinations.

Work is currently underway on revising Leaving Certificate Agricultural Science and Applied Mathematics.

New syllabuses are in place at both junior and senior cycles for Mathematics, often called

“project mathematics”. Since 2010, the Project Maths Development Team, www.projectmaths.ie, a support service funded by my Department provides a range of professional development supports including workshops, and resources for 6,000 post-primary teachers of mathematics across the country.

Since 2012, the Professional Diploma in Mathematics for Teaching, a blended learning, two year part-time programme Professional Diploma in Mathematics for Teaching has been made available nationwide and free of charge, to assist ‘out-of-field’ teachers to acquire skills for effective mathematics teaching and to register with the Teaching Council as teachers of mathematics at post-primary level. The programme, provided by a consortium led by the University of Limerick, is being made available again in September 2015. Some 800 teachers are involved in this initiative. The first cohort graduated in 2104.

It is heartening to know that the number of students in recent years presenting for Higher Level in both the Junior Certificate and in the Leaving Certificate mathematics has been increasing.

Support is also available at primary and post primary level through the Professional Development Service for Teachers in the science and mathematics area.

All of these initiatives have given our students the skills and confidence, if they choose, to continue their studies in these areas in Higher Education.

National Educational Psychological Service Administration

191. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason a person (details supplied) in County Donegal was refused resource hours; if she is aware that parents are paying privately to have their children assessed when there is no National Educational Psychological Service available in the school, which is the case for a school (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18028/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): I wish to firstly advise the Deputy that the school in question is currently assigned a National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist.

In common with many other psychological services, NEPS encourages a staged assessment process, whereby each school takes responsibility for a pupil’s initial assessment, educational planning and remedial intervention in consultation with their assigned NEPS psychologist. Only if there is a failure to make reasonable progress in spite of the school’s best efforts, will a child be referred for individual psychological assessment. It is the responsibility of the school Principal in the first instance to identify and prioritise pupils for assessment under the process described above.

If a parent has concerns in this regard they should be raised with the school Principal in the first instance who can contact NEPS Regional Office for clarification if necessary.

I wish to advise the Deputy also that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible, through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), for allocating resource teaching support to schools to support children with low incidence special educational needs, as defined by my Department’s Circular SpEd 02/05.

The NCSE operates within my Department’s criteria in allocating such support.

All schools have been asked to apply to the NCSE for resource teaching support for the 2015/16 school year by 18th March, 2015.

The NCSE will consider all applications which have been made by schools, following which allocations will be made to qualifying schools. All schools have the names and contact details of their local SENO. Parents may also contact their local SENO directly to discuss their child's special educational needs, using the contact details available on www.ncse.ie.

In circumstances where a parent or school wishes to make an appeal against a refusal by the NCSE to allocate resource teaching hours to a school on behalf of a child, in accordance with my Department's criteria, they may make an appeal in accordance with the procedures set out by the NCSE. These are available on the NCSE's website at www.ncse.ie.

It should also be noted that all Primary schools have been allocated additional teaching resources to cater for children with high incidence special educational needs through the General Allocation Model of additional teaching supports.

It is a matter for schools to monitor and utilise their allocation of additional teaching support to best support the needs of identified pupils, in accordance with my Department's guidance. The teaching time afforded to each individual pupil is decided and managed by schools, taking into account each child's individual learning needs.

Special Educational Needs Data

192. Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason applications to the National Council for Special Needs Education for resource teaching hours on behalf of students with special education needs that miss the March 2015 deadline because schools are waiting for the relevant documentation from health care professionals cannot be processed until October 2015; her views that in such circumstances, it is unacceptable that students with special education needs and their teachers should have to forgo the resource teaching hours to which they are entitled for almost 25% of the school year as a direct result of administrative inflexibility; her views that it should at least be possible to have such late applications processed and the applicable resource teaching hours allocated in time for the students' return from the summer break; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18033/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): The Deputy will be aware that in recent years the National Council for Special Needs Education (NCSE) Resource Teaching allocation process has operated as an annual allocation process, whereby schools are asked to submit all of their resource teaching applications to the NCSE by March of each year, and then receive details of their resource teaching allocations for the coming school year before the end of the current school year.

This provides certainty to schools regarding the resources which they will have in place for the coming school year and allows schools to undertake the necessary planning and development work.

Where schools have been unable to submit some of their applications in time to meet the March application process deadline, the NCSE provides for a second round application process in October of each year. After this point the allocation process for the school year will have been effectively completed, other than in respect of a small number of exceptional or emergency cases.

Where schools may be awaiting a response in respect of an applications pending for the

second round application process they should provide additional teaching support for any child requiring such support from the totality of their resource teaching and learning support allocation, pending the completion of any application.

The Deputy will be aware that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has recommended the development of a new model for delivering teaching resources to schools to support students with special needs.

Through consultations, there was a broad welcome for the proposed new model from Parents, disability groups, schools and stakeholders. However, there has not been sufficient time to address all of the concerns which have been raised in advance of the 2015 school year.

My Department is, however, continuing to develop the new allocation model for schools and is currently working to devise a pilot of the new model. Issues regarding any adjustments to the existing allocation process will therefore be considered in the context of the development of a new allocation model.

Teacher Data

193. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding an application for a resource teacher in respect of a child (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18054/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): I wish to advise the Deputy that, in primary schools, additional teaching supports for pupils with special education needs are provided through two channels.

Under the terms of the General Allocation Model (GAM) of teaching supports, schools are resourced to cater for pupils whose educational psychological assessment places them in the high incidence, or less complex, disability category. All mainstream Primary schools have been allocated additional teaching resources under the GAM to cater for children with high incidence special educational needs.

Separately, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) allocates additional resource teaching hours to schools for children who have been assessed within the low incidence, or more complex, category of special need, as defined by my Department’s Circular Sp Ed 02/05. The NCSE operates within my Department’s established criteria for the allocation of Special Education supports and the staffing resources available to my Department.

It is a matter for schools to monitor and utilise their allocation of additional teaching support to best support the needs of identified pupils, in accordance with my Department’s guidance. The teaching time afforded to each individual pupil is decided and managed by schools, taking into account each child’s individual learning needs.

Should a parent be dissatisfied with the manner in which the resources or facilities which have been provided to support their child’s education are being applied in school, they should raise this matter directly with their school Principal or the Board of Management of the school.

All schools have been asked to apply to the NCSE for resource teaching and SNA support for the 2015/16 school year by 18th March, 2015.

The NCSE will consider all applications which have been made by schools, following which allocations will be made to qualifying schools.

All schools have the names and contact details of their local SENO. Parents may also contact their local SENO directly to discuss their child's special educational needs, using the contact details available on www.ncse.ie.

Scoileanna Gaeltachta

194. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Oideachais agus Scileanna an bhfuil sé i gceist aici airgead breise a cheadú do Scoil Bhaile Nua (uimhir rolla 15331H) de bharr costas breise a bheith orthu i dtaca leis an togra tógála atá idir lámha acu a chur i gcrích, rud a eascraíonn as na rialacha nua tógála a chuir an Rialtas seo ar bun; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [18063/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): I mí Lúnasa 2014, ceadáíodh deontas déabhlóidithe do Scoil Bhaile Nua faoi Scéim Chóiríochta Breise mo Roinne chun rangsheomra príomhshrutha breise amháin agus leithreas d'úsáideoirí cuidithe a chur ar fáil.

Chuir an tÚdarás Scoile iarratas faoi bhráid le déanaí ar mhaoiniú breise chun cloí le Teastais um Shábháilteacht Dóiteáin agus Rochtain do Dhaoine faoi Mhíchumas. Táthar tar éis a iarraidh ar an Údarás Scoile tuilleadh eolais a chur ar fáil maidir leis an leibhéal cóiríochta atá molta agus a luaithe is a fhaighfear an t-eolas seo breithneofar an t-iarratas ar mhaoiniú breise.

Scoileanna Gaeltachta

195. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Oideachais agus Scileanna cén fáth nach bhfuil áit ar bhord nua na Comhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) d'ionadaí ó eagraíocht na scoileanna Gaeltachta, ag cur i gcuntas an tábhacht a bhaineann leis an scolaíocht Ghaeltachta do leanaí na Gaeltachta agus don teanga; an bhfuil sé i gceist aici athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar an gceist seo; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [18065/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): Tá meas agam ar an dtuiscint agus ar an dtaithe a thugann ionadaithe na scoileanna Gaeltachta go COGG agus an ról atá tar éis a bheith acu maidir leis an obair chuimsitheach atá déanta ag COGG ó bunaíodh í sa bhliain 2002.

I gcomhthéacs an bhunaithe do bhord nua COGG tá roinnt deiseanna ann do scoileanna Gaeltachta ionadaíocht a fháil trí Údarás na Gaeltachta agus trí na trí cheardchumann do mhúinteoirí.

Third Level Data

196. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills further to Parliamentary Question No. 560 of 24 February 2015, her plans to progress the change mooted by her predecessor so that Irish expatriate citizens and their children, who are also citizens, are not penalised in terms of restrictions to access free-fee university education, in view of the fact that they had left the country for work reasons during the recession, as having to be back here for three out of five years of secondary education, as is currently the case, is too restrictive and unfair, in view of the developments in the economy since 2007. [18066/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): As outlined previously to the Deputy where undergraduate students do not qualify for free fees funding under the Free

Fees Initiative they must pay the appropriate fee - either EU or Non-EU, as determined by each higher education institution. Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies and the level of fee payable by students who do not meet the requirements of the free fees scheme, including the residency requirement, is a matter for the relevant institution. Due to concerns raised in relation to the fact that in some cases the higher non-EU fee was being charged to students who had EU/EEA/Swiss nationality but did not meet the residency clause for free fees, the previous Minister requested that higher education institutions charge the more moderate EU fee to such students who have completed at least five academic years of study (primary or post-primary level) in Ireland/EU/EEA/Switzerland.

There are no plans to amend the residency requirement of the Free Fees Initiative at present.

Schools Building Projects Status

197. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the stage at which a proposed building project in respect of a school (details supplied) in County Cavan is at; when this project will proceed to the next stage; the likely timeframe for construction; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18098/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): The project to provide permanent accommodation for the school to which the Deputy refers is currently at Stage 2a (Developed Design) of the architectural planning process.

A tender exercise for a replacement Consultant Mechanical and Electrical Engineer has become necessary in order to complete the stage 2(a) design. This tender exercise is currently in progress and the closing date for receipt of tenders is the 12th May 2015.

When Stage 2a of the project is fully completed, and subject to no other issues arising, the project will progress to Stage 2b (Detailed Design). Planning Permission, Fire Safety Certification, Disability Access Certification have been obtained for this project. Stage 2(b) will also include the completion of tender documents.

Due to competing demands on my Department’s capital budget, imposed by the need to prioritise the limited funding available for the provision of additional school accommodation to meet increasing demographic requirements, it was not possible to include this project in the 5 year construction programme announced in March 2012.

School building projects, including the project referred to by the Deputy, which have been initiated but not included in the current five year construction programme will continue to be progressed to final planning stages in anticipation of the possibility of further funds being available to my Department in the future.

Public Sector Staff Increments

198. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under her remit per year since 2008. [18331/15]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): The information requested by the Deputy is not readily available as it is not possible to easily isolate salary adjustments due to increments from other salary adjustments and to obtain this information from across the education sector. To obtain the financial information requested would require a disproportion-

ate amount of effort relative to the resources available.

Nitrates Action Programme Implementation

199. **Deputy Arthur Spring** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government in view of the abolition of milk quotas, if he will consider extending the current derogation under the nitrates directive to 300 kg per hectare per year, targeted specifically at smaller farms with the ambition to expand. [17963/15]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly): The EU Nitrates Directive and Ireland's National Nitrates Action Programme limit the amount of nitrogen from livestock manure which may be applied to land each year, including by the animals themselves, to 170 kg of nitrogen per hectare per annum.

On 27 February 2014, after lengthy negotiation, the EU Nitrates Management Committee renewed Ireland's derogation which enables farmers who meet strict conditions to increase this application limit to 250 kg of nitrogen per hectare per annum. This derogation was given effect by an EU Decision and is transposed into Irish law by the European Union (Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Waters) (Amendment) Regulations 2014.

Housing Provision

200. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if he will provide in tabular form a detailed breakdown of the way the €1.5 billion allocated for social housing will be spent by his Department for each constituency; and the way the €57 million allocated for County Tipperary will be spent. [17914/15]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly): The social housing targets that I recently announced for all local authorities cover the period to 2017 and include almost 7,500 units that will be capital-funded and 15,400 current-funded units, which will support a combination of building, buying and leasing schemes by local authorities. My announcement also contained provisional funding allocations within the overall announcement of over €1.5 billion. These individual local authority allocations are sufficient to deliver the targeted units.

The overall delivery target for Tipperary County Council is 832 units in the period to 2017, broken down as follows:

Local Authority Housing/AHB delivery/Return of vacant properties	Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme	Rental Accommodation-Scheme
287	342	203

The provisional funding allocation to support the capital target of 287 units is €52.9m. Funding for the Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme (SHCEP) and the Rental Accommodation Scheme is provided on a national basis without individual local authority/ approved housing body funding allocations.

On 5 May 2015, I announced the first major direct build social housing programme under

the Social Housing Strategy. This announcement covers 100 separate housing projects across all local authorities. Information including details of the projects approved for Tipperary County Council, is available on my Department's website at the following link: <http://www.environ.ie/en/DevelopmentHousing/Housing/News/MainBody,41340,en.htm>.

Capital Assistance Scheme

201. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if he will provide the schedule for funding the development of Edel House (details supplied) to facilitate proper planning of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17927/15]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly): Proposals for this scheme were submitted and funding was approved under my Department's Capital Assistance Scheme in 2014. As the design has now been amended, my Department has requested and is awaiting additional information from Cork City Council, to allow the altered proposal and design to be evaluated.

Public Sector Staff Retirements

202. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government when a decision will be made on whether a person (details supplied) in County Monaghan will be made to retire or if other arrangements will be made; if his Department recognises that it has responsibility for this issue; if representations have been received on this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17946/15]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly): Representations have previously been received by my Department on this matter and were responded to. With regard to local authority employment, the position is that since the enactment of the Public Service Superannuation (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2004, the minimum age at which pensions will be payable to new entrants to the public service, from 1 April 2004, is age 65 and there is no compulsory retirement age. For staff who are not 'New Entrants' as defined in that Act, a pension is generally payable from age 60 with a compulsory retirement age of 65.

In relation to the retirement age of public sector employees, this is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

The State Pension (Transition) which had been payable at 65, was abolished on 1 January 2014 and is a matter for my colleague, the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection.

Private Residential Tenancies Board

203. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the Private Residential Tenancies Board; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17986/15]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Paudie Coffey): The Residential Tenancies Act 2004 regulates the tenant-landlord relationship in the private rented residential sector. The Private Residential Tenancies

Board (PRTB) was established under the Act to operate a national tenancy registration system and to facilitate the resolution of disputes between landlords and tenants in this sector.

According to the PRTB Annual Report for 2013, adjudication processing times were an average of 7 months in 2013 compared to 12 months in 2012. For 2014, I understand adjudications were taking an average of 5 to 6 months to process. Late 2013 also saw the introduction of a pilot telephone mediation service as an alternative means to address disputes. Processing times for mediation cases are typically 10 to 12 weeks.

The PRTB, as an independent statutory body, will adjudicate each dispute on its own facts and merits and may grant redress and give specific direction as appropriate on foot of a determination order. Receipt of a determination order is the official notification to parties of the final outcome of a dispute resolution case. The order sets out the terms to be complied with, including any payments owing and the length of time given to comply. In making determination orders, the PRTB can make provision to allow for payment of awards in instalments to facilitate recovery of the award, based on the circumstances of the case.

A party who fails to comply with one or more terms of a determination order is open to having legal proceedings taken against him or her in the Courts. Under the Act, enforcement of PRTB orders is a discretionary power and the Board exercises this power taking account of the circumstances pertaining to each case. However, while there is no legal obligation on the PRTB to enforce, the Board takes the issue of non-compliance with determination orders seriously. During 2013, it referred 394 cases to its legal advisors for enforcement proceedings. It is also open to parties to pursue enforcement independently through the Courts, including the seeking of a garnishee order. It should be noted that going to Court does not of itself ensure successful enforcement and more particularly, recoupment of an award. In many cases the best option, and one which the PRTB facilitates, is for the parties to agree a schedule of payments.

Housing Adaptation Grant

204. **Deputy Michelle Mulherin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government the grants and supports available in the provision and adaptation of housing for persons with intellectual disabilities to provide for some independent living in the community; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18055/15]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly): The provision of housing to support independent living by people with specific categories of need, including people with an intellectual, physical or mental health disability, older people, the homeless, returning emigrants and victims of domestic violence, is supported through my Department's Capital Assistance Scheme. The scheme provides funding of up to 100% of the approved costs. Housing under this Scheme is provided by approved housing bodies and its detailed administration is the responsibility of the relevant local authority.

My Department and the local authorities also provide supports to tenants of local authority housing and to private house owners in respect of necessary housing adaptations. For the former, my Department meets 90% of the cost of adaptation works to meet the needs of local authority tenants with a disability, with local authorities providing the remaining 10%. For private house owners, the suite of Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability assists households with specific needs to have necessary repairs or improvement works carried out to facilitate the continued independent occupancy of their homes. My Department provides 80% of the approved funding, with a 20% contribution from the local authorities.

Leader Programmes Funding

205. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if he will bring the Leader programme in line with the rest of the 2014 to 2020 rural development scheme programme by increasing the Leader co-financing rate from 37% to 46% (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18060/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Ann Phelan): The Leader element of the Rural Development Programme 2014 – 2020, will provide €250 million in financial resources to rural communities over the next 5-6 years.

While the allocation for the Leader element of the 2014-2020 programme is less than the value of the LEADER element of 2007–2013 programme, I am confident that within the confines of the fiscal environment we have experienced in the recent past, the Government has allocated the maximum amount possible to support the Leader elements of the 2014-2020 programme and in this context it is not proposed to increase the co-financing rate at this time.

The €250 million funding available under the 2014-2020 programme, coupled with the Government's drive to increase coordination at a local level and the commitment to the delivery of the recommendations in the Report of the Commission on the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA), will ensure that the impact of the funding will be maximised to support the sustainable development of our rural communities.

Leader Programmes Administration

206. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if, as previously, it is intended to have a single Leader company delivering the Leader programme on all the offshore islands; if not, the arrangement that will apply to the islands; the details of the discussions that have taken place with the island communities regarding this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18079/15]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Ann Phelan): For the purposes of the Leader elements of the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, rural areas in Ireland are considered to be those areas outside the cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford.

As the Deputy will be aware, Ireland is reconfiguring the way in which local and rural development interventions are implemented. This is in line with Government policy to ensure that local government is well positioned to support the effective and efficient delivery of local and rural development. In this context, €220 million of the overall Leader programme complement for the 2014-2020 period has been allocated based on administrative or county boundaries to 28 sub-regional areas. I do not propose to change this at this stage.

However, in the context of the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme, I am anxious that the implementation of the Leader elements of the programme reflects a community led approach and in order to ensure this, each sub-regional area will be responsible for determining its own needs and will outline how it proposes to address those needs in its Local Development Strategy.

This approach will also apply to those areas that contain island communities and each Local Development Strategy will be required to outline how it proposes to address the needs of both its Island and Gaeltacht communities, as appropriate. I encourage these communities to ensure

that they engage fully with the Local Development Strategy development processes for their respective areas in order to ensure that their needs and concerns are fully addressed.

Public Sector Staff Increments

207. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under his remit, per year since 2008. [18332/15]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly): It is not possible to extract historical increment financial data from the system on a global basis for the years 2008 - 2011. Historic costs could be calculated manually on an individual basis but this would take a prohibitively long time. The number of increments awarded to staff in my Department, along with indicative approximate values of new increments paid, in each of the years from 2012 to date, is set out in the following table:

Year	No. of Increments Awarded	Value of Increments Paid €
2012	317	310,000
2013	266	250,000
2014	151	141,000
2015 to date	68	42,500

Increments are paid in line with the approved rates of pay at the time as outlined on the websites of the Department of Finance and Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and in line with arrangements in place under the Haddington Road Agreement since 1 July 2013. Those staff who have reached the maximum or long service increment point of their salary scales do not receive increments. The payment of increments is subject to satisfactory performance under the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS).

The corresponding information in terms of Agencies and Local Authorities is not held in my Department.

Public Sector Pensions

208. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if he will reverse the harmful cuts introduced by the Government in respect of the Electricity Supply Board's retired staff pension entitlements, which have severely disadvantaged pensioners; if he supports the rights of these pensioners to engage in meaningful negotiations with their former employer and the trustees of the pension schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18025/15]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): The ESB General Employees' Superannuation Scheme is the scheme through which pensions for the majority of employees in the electricity business are funded. The fund is vested in trustees nominated by ESB and its members for the sole benefit of employees and their dependents. The Scheme is a defined benefit scheme and is registered as such with the Pensions Authority (formerly the Pensions Board). The issue of management of and attendance at meetings convened in respect of operation of the pension scheme is a matter for the Trustees of the Pension Fund and not one in which I have a role or function.

National Broadband Plan Implementation

209. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the progress made in the provision of e fibre broadband, and in particular when it will be available in Passage West, County Cork (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17931/15]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): Last November I published a national high speed coverage map for 2016 as part of the National Broadband Plan. This map is available at www.broadband.gov.ie. The areas marked BLUE represent those areas that will have access to commercial high speed broadband services by end of 2016 and represents 70% of the premises in Ireland. The AMBER areas show the target areas for the State intervention and represents 30% of the premises in Ireland.

The map shows that Passage West is in the Blue area with high speed broadband services to be delivered through commercial investment later this year.

Through a combination of commercial and targeted State investment, the aim of the National Broadband Plan is to ensure that every premise, regardless of location, has access to high speed broadband.

Postal Codes

210. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the reason for the delay in implementing the Eircode system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17941/15]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): The Government is fully committed to introducing Eircodes, the national postcode system for Ireland. The Eircode project is currently in the implementation phase and is on target to be launched this summer. Every Irish address, residential and business, will be sent a notification by post this summer with the eircode enclosed.

Eircode is a major new development for Ireland and priority has been placed on ensuring that there is widespread public understanding of how Eircodes will work – and of the benefits they will bring to households and businesses – before and during the introduction of the codes.

I will be announcing the actual launch date for Eircodes in the next few weeks. For further information and updates you may wish to visit the website www.eircode.ie.

Semi-State Bodies

211. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if he is aware of the position being adopted by the management of Bord na Móna, whereby it is attempting to impose unilateral changes to employees' conditions of employment; his views that if current talks with management at the Labour Relations Commission do not deliver a workable agreement, there would be an immediate ballot for industrial action across all sections of the company; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17967/15]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): Bord na Móna is facing significant business challenges in the context of the deregulation of

the energy market and increasingly competitive and challenging environments across all its business areas. I understand that in order to ensure its continued success, the company is implementing a programme to transform all areas of its operations and structure, the key objective of which is to improve business effectiveness and efficiency.

I have been advised that management and union representatives are currently involved in discussions under the auspices of the Labour Relations Commission on a range of issues relating to business transformation in the company. These discussions include areas related to the terms and conditions of employees. There has been a brief pause in the talks but they are due to resume shortly. Both sides have agreed that items not agreed during the talks process will be referred to the Labour Court. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on this matter while these discussions are in progress.

As a matter of routine, I regularly meet with the Chair and management of the company on a range of policy issues but I have not had discussions with them regarding the specific matter referred to by the Deputy.

Post Office Network

212. **Deputy Jim Daly** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if he is satisfied that he has no statutory function on post office locations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17979/15]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): Matters relating to the post office network are an operational matter for the Board and management of An Post and one in which I have no statutory function.

Broadband Service Provision

213. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the status of the broadband coverage in Ballymore, County Westmeath; the percentage of residents who have full coverage; and the number who have access to broadband and high speed broadband. [18019/15]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): The National Broadband Plan is delivering high speed broadband to every home and business in Ireland regardless of its location. This is being achieved through a partnership between Government and commercial telecommunications companies.

The commercial telecommunications sector is currently investing approximately €2.5 billion in network upgrades and enhanced services with approximately 1.6 million of the 2.3 million premises in Ireland expected to have access to commercial high speed broadband services over the next two years. These very significant investments represent a step-change in the quality of broadband services available.

Last November I published a national high speed coverage map for 2016. This map is available at www.broadband.gov.ie. The map shows Ireland with two colours, BLUE and AMBER.

The areas marked BLUE represent those areas where commercial providers plan to deliver high speed broadband services by end 2016. I understand that commercial high speed broadband service is already available to over 20,000 premises in Co Westmeath (45% of county premises). When commercial roll-out of high speed services in the county is complete by the

end of next year, a further 6,500 premises in Westmeath (15% of county premises) will have access to such services.

The AMBER area on the map shows the target areas for the State intervention and includes Ballymore, Co Westmeath. All premises within the AMBER areas will be included in the State's intervention. The proposed State intervention will include some 17,814 premises in Westmeath (40% of the county's premises).

Intensive design and planning work is underway in my Department to produce a detailed intervention strategy for the AMBER area. Following a public consultation process on the draft Intervention Strategy this summer, I hope to move to formal procurement phase towards the end of this year in order to select a preferred bidder or bidders.

I anticipate that the first homes and businesses will be connected in 2016 and connections will continue thereafter, with the intention of having all premises connected within a 5 year period.

This complex and ambitious project is a key priority for Government and aims to conclusively address current broadband connectivity challenges in Ireland.

Renewable Energy Incentives

214. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if his Department is considering a shift in public policy to incentivise other renewable energy sources, including solar energy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18053/15]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): The overarching objective of the Government's energy policy is to ensure secure and sustainable supplies of competitively priced energy to all consumers. In the context of the forthcoming energy policy paper, my Department is considering the optimal fuel mix, including the role of renewable energy, for Ireland. The Green Paper on Energy Policy, *inter alia*, sought feedback on the role that alternative technologies, such as solar, could play in delivering our renewable energy ambitions. Views received will be taken into consideration in the preparation of the White Paper on Energy which will be published in September.

The Renewable Electricity Feed in Tariff (REFIT) schemes are the principal means of supporting renewable electricity generators for renewable energy exported to the grid. These schemes support electricity generated from a range of renewables sources including small scale hydro, biomass and wind. Small scale renewable generation is eligible to apply for support under the REFIT schemes.

Analysis of the potential of microgeneration technologies such as small scale wind, solar (including photovoltaic) and small scale hydro, has been carried out by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). The SEAI's findings, along with responses to the recent consultation on the Green Paper on Energy Policy in Ireland, will inform future policy on the provision of any market support for microgeneration.

Given the emerging policy context and the requirements of the EU target market for electricity, my Department is beginning the process of developing a new support scheme for electricity, to be available from 2016 onwards. A key component of this will be consideration of all available technologies, their cost effectiveness and the level of support required. The scheme will be subject to State Aid clearance and the initial public consultation on the new scheme will

commence shortly.

Energy Policy

215. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources when the White Paper on Renewable Energy will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18085/15]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): The Green Paper on Energy Policy in Ireland was published in May 2014 and sets out six energy policy priorities as follows: empowering energy citizens; markets and regulation; planning and implementing essential energy infrastructure; ensuring a balanced and secure energy mix; putting the energy system on a sustainable pathway; and driving economic opportunity.

The publication of the Green Paper commenced a period of public consultation under which 1,240 written submissions were made. The process of developing a definitive Energy Policy has continued with further engagement at stakeholder events at various regional locations around the country. My Department is now focussed on the detailed work required to develop the White Paper on Energy Policy in Ireland which I expect to publish in September 2015.

Public Sector Staff Increments

216. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under his remit per year since 2008. [18329/15]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): The information requested is being compiled and will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible. In relation to bodies under the aegis of my Department, this is an operational matter for each body. My Department will ask the relevant bodies to supply the information directly to the Deputy.

Proposed Legislation

217. **Deputy Jim Daly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he is satisfied with the current laws on the use of drones, noting the increase in the use of personally owned drones and having due regard for privacy laws for the greater public. [17969/15]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The increase in the operation and use of remotely piloted aircraft systems (RPAS), also known as drones, is not a phenomenon exclusive to Ireland; it is on a global scale and it is appropriate that rules be developed internationally to regulate their operation and use.

In March of this year under the Riga Declaration, the European Commission, in concert with the European Union Aviation Community, established the principles to guide the regulatory framework for RPAS in Europe. Central to these principles is the consideration of citizen's fundamental rights – the right to privacy and the use of personal data. The aim is for a European regulatory system which ensures the responsibility and accountability of operators so as to facilitate the enforcement of the regulations by the Authorities.

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The Irish Aviation Authority, which is responsible for the safety of airspace operators in Ireland, published its policy for the regulation of the safe use of RPAS in Ireland in April 2012. The IAA is a member of the International grouping of Joint Authorities for Rulemaking on Unmanned Systems (JARUS), which is engaged in furthering the development of international standards in personnel licensing and competency towards the safe operation of RPAS.

Road Projects

218. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide an update on the proposed upgrading of the N20 route, Cork to Limerick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17910/15]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): 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.

Given the national financial position, there have been very large reductions in roads expenditure over the past number of years. The reality is that the available funds do not match the amount of work which could be undertaken. For this reason it has not been possible to progress a range of worthwhile projects and the main focus has to be on the maintenance and repair of roads and this will remain the position in the coming years. The scope for progressing new major road improvement projects will be very much dependent on the availability of funding in the future as the economy recovers further.

In 2011 my predecessor indicated to the NRA that it should withdraw its application to An Bord Pleanála for the M20 Cork to Limerick route. I understand Minister Varadkar was concerned that to proceed any further with the scheme to build the M20 would have exposed the NRA to significant costs arising from a consequent requirement to purchase the CPO'd land within a limited timeframe. This would have had to be done without the reasonable prospect of proceeding to the construction stage quickly.

Given continuing budget constraints and the need to focus on road maintenance and renewal, I do not currently plan to review this decision.

National Roads Authority Staff

219. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of persons who are employed by the National Roads Authority. [17948/15]

220. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the cost of the day-to-day running of the National Roads Authority. [17950/15]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 219 and 220 together.

As these are matters in the first instance for the National Roads Authority (NRA), I have referred the Deputy's questions to the NRA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Road Safety

221. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport further to Parliamentary Question No. 881 of 15 April 2015, if he has considered the safety merits of a regulatory system on imported and second hand tyre sales; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17964/15]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As I stated in my previous reply, the onus is on every vehicle owner to ensure that their tyres are fit for purpose and are free from defects. The Road Safety Authority has submitted a report to my Department in relation to the possibility of regulating the sale of second hand tyres. In common with all proposals in relation to road safety, I will keep this matter under review. It is not however a matter that is identified as an action point in the present Road Safety Strategy 2013 to 2020.

It is an offence to use a vehicle with defective or worn tyres and it does not matter whether these were the original tyres fitted to the vehicle or subsequently acquired second hand. My Department is in consultation with the Gardaí with a view to making this a fixed charge offence which will attract 2 penalty points, or 4 points on conviction in Court.

Traffic Regulations Implementation

222. **Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the reason the National Transport Authority objected to the National University of Ireland Dublin providing additional parking spaces on campus, to meet the growing demand for parking spaces, which has consequently caused great issues along surrounding roads, particularly Woodbine Road; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17965/15]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The National Transport Authority (NTA), working in partnership with UCD, is responsible for implementing a range of sustainable transport measures on the UCD campus.

Accordingly, I have forwarded your request to them for direct reply to you. If you have not received a response from the NTA within 10 working days please contact my office.

Parking Provision

223. **Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the steps being taken, in view of the serious lack of parking spaces, to incentivise students attending the National University of Ireland Dublin campus to use public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17966/15]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The National Transport Authority (NTA), working in partnership with UCD, is responsible for implementing a range of sustainable transport measures on the UCD campus.

Accordingly, I have forwarded your request to them for direct reply to you. If you have not received a response from the NTA within 10 working days please contact my office.

Railway Stations Upgrade

224. **Deputy Timmy Dooley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when Kishogue railway station will be open to provide a vital service to the residents of south Lucan and the surrounding area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17981/15]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and the overall funding of public transport.

Responsibility for the development public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area, including train stations, is a function of the National Transport Authority (NTA).

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

Road Safety Strategy

225. **Deputy Brian Walsh** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide an update on the status of the Road Safety Strategy 2013-20 and, specifically, the consultation process in relation to action 105; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18050/15]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The current Road Safety Strategy 2013-2020 aims to make Ireland one of the safest countries in terms of road deaths in the EU. The Strategy sets a specific target for 2020 to reduce the number of road deaths to 124 or fewer a year (from 162 in 2012) and serious injuries to 330 per year (from 485 in 2012). This drop is necessary to close the gap between Ireland and other best performing countries.

A Ministerial Group on Road Safety, which I chair, oversees the implementation of the 144 Actions in the Strategy. Overall I am satisfied that good progress is being made in implementing the actions set out in the Strategy.

Action 105 of the Road Safety Strategy contains a commitment to make it compulsory for all vehicles to carry an emergency breakdown pack. I understand from the Road Safety Authority that they will be publishing a document for the purposes of a public consultation on this Action in the coming weeks.

I will consider how best to progress this when the Road Safety Authority has drawn conclusions from its consultation process.

Road Network

226. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide details on the possession of his Department or the National Roads Authority regarding future projects (details supplied). [18057/15]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): 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.

Sports Capital Programme Applications

227. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding a sports capital grant in respect of a school (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18061/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): I can confirm that an application has been submitted by the organisation referred to by the Deputy under the 2015 Sports Capital Programme and the Deputy's support for the project is noted.

I expect to announce allocations later this year.

Sports Capital Programme Applications

228. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding a sports capital grant in respect of a club (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18087/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): I can confirm that an application has been submitted by the organisation referred to by the Deputy under the 2015 Sports Capital Programme and the Deputy's support for the project is noted.

I expect to announce allocations later this year.

National Monuments

229. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht further to Parliamentary Question No. 512 of 28 April 2015, if she will expand on the reason she has no ownership or guardianship of St. Naul's well in Inver in County Donegal, despite the well being on the record of monuments and places; in relation to an inspection that was carried out in December 2012, the outcome of this inspection in respect to the preservation of the well; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17908/15]

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The inclusion of a monument in the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) under section 12 of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 1994 does not confer ownership or guardianship on the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. The RMP contains in excess of 130,000 monuments and places, the vast majority of which are privately owned.

While St. Naul's Well is of archaeological interest, it would not be of a national significance consonant with being taken into Ministerial guardianship or being acquired by my Department whereby, it would become one of the relatively small number of national monuments in State care. There are present in the region of 1,000 such monuments at some 700 locations around

the country.

As indicated in my reply to Question No. 512 of 28 April 2015, my Department carried out an inspection of the monument in December 2012 and advised the owner of the legal protection afforded to it under section 12 of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 1994. That inspection did not establish that there had been a contravention of the provisions of section 12 of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 1994.

Foras na Gaeilge

230. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta an bhfuil sé i gceist aici maoiniú díreach a chur ar fáil don iris 'An Timire' má tharraingíonn Foras na Gaeilge an maoiniú atá á chur ar fáil don iris sin siar, ó tharla gurb í an iris Ghaeilge is faide atá á foilsiú agus go bhfuil fás agus forbairt tagtha uirthi le tamall anuas agus ós rud é nach bhfuil ar fáil ag an iris ach €6,000 in aghaidh na bliana; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [18064/15]

Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Joe McHugh): I dtosach báire, ní mór dom a threisiú gur ceist oibríochtúil atá ann d'Fhoras na Gaeilge maoiniú a chur ar fáil d'irisí Gaeilge agus níl aon ról agam féin mar Aire Stáit ina leith.

Mar atá mínithe agam cheana, tá sé mar aidhm ag Foras na Gaeilge pobal léitheoireachta na Gaeilge a spreagadh agus an iriseoireacht Ghaeilge a chothú trí dhíriú ar ábhar léitheoireachta a chur ar fáil saor in aisce ar líne. Tar éis don Fhoras próiseas tairisceana poiblí a reáchtáil, tuigtear dom gur bronnadh conarthaí i ndáil leis na foilseacháin seo a leanas: nuachtán seachtainiúil (*Tuairisc.ie*), iris stíl mhaireachtála (*Nos.ie*) agus foilseachán liteartha (*Comhar*). Tuigtear dom fosta ó Fhoras na Gaeilge go léiríonn na figiúirí léitheoireachta go dtí seo go bhfuil ag éirí leis an chur chuige seo.

Níl aon phleananna ag mo Roinn maoiniú díreach a chur ar fáil don iriseoireacht Ghaeilge i bhfianaise na bhfeidhmeanna atá á gcomhlíonadh ag Foras na Gaeilge san earnáil seo.

Public Sector Staff Increments

231. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the cost to the Exchequer of the payment of increments to all public sector staff under her remit, per year since 2008. [18327/15]

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Heather Humphreys): A summary of the number and aggregate value of increments awarded to staff of my Department in each year since its establishment in June 2011 is set out in the table.

Year	No of Increments Awarded	Aggregate Value of Increments Awarded
2011 (2 Jun-31 Dec)*	74	€98,000
2012	269	€374,000
2013	279	€377,000
2014	187	€247,000

*Does not include increments awarded to Professional & Technical Grades who remained on the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government payroll during this period.

Questions - Written Answers

I have arranged for the corresponding information in respect of bodies under the aegis of my Department to be forwarded to the Deputy under separate cover, as it was not possible to collate this information in the time available.