

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 9, inclusive, answered orally.

Questions Nos. 10 to 24, inclusive, resubmitted.

Questions Nos. 25 to 37, inclusive, answered orally.

Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance Scheme Payments

38. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to increase the back to school clothing and footwear allowance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25709/17]

68. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to assist families with increasing back to school costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25933/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 38 and 68 together.

The back to school clothing and footwear allowance scheme provides a once-off payment to eligible families to assist with the costs of clothing and footwear when children start or return to school each autumn. The allowance is not intended to meet the full cost of school clothing and footwear but to provide assistance to parents towards these costs.

The Government has provided €37.4 million for the scheme in 2017 which will operate from June to September. The allowance will be paid week commencing 10 July to allow parents sufficient time to prepare for back to school. Similar to arrangements in previous years, the majority of payments under this scheme will be paid with no application form required. Customers who do not receive notification of an automated payment over the next few weeks should make a written application to my Department.

The income limits for the scheme are being increased for 2017 and will ensure that the increases in social welfare payment rates introduced by Budget 2017 do not negatively impact on people's entitlement to the allowance.

The payment rates are €100 for eligible children aged 4 to 11 years and €200 for children aged over 12 years and attending secondary school. Any changes to these rates would have to be considered in a budgetary context and within the scope of the overall resources available for welfare improvements.

Members of the house may be aware that my colleague, the Minister for Education and Skills, has recently published a new circular on the measures to be adopted by schools to reduce the cost of school uniforms and other costs, as part of a range of measures to take greater account of the needs of parents and students in the school system.

I trust this clarifies the arrangements in place.

Social Welfare Fraud

39. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Social Protection the details of research carried out by his Department into the savings expected to be made as a result of the current welfare fraud campaign; if, in view of the fact that only 21% of identified overpayments made by his Department in 2015 were actually fraudulent as opposed to claims and payments made in error and that in the past four years overpayments due to error on the part of claimants and departmental staff have cost more than fraud, his views on whether his campaign should focus more on reducing errors on the part of both the claimant and departmental staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25937/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I would like thank the Deputy for raising this important issue.

Total overpayments raised by my Department in 2016 amounted to €110 million. Of this, customer fraud amounted to €41 million. Cases of this nature arise where a customer intentionally provides incomplete or inaccurate information in order to receive benefits or deliberately fails to inform the Department of relevant changes in their circumstances.

While the €41m is €5 million lower than the previous year and this is welcome, overall, I consider it to be unacceptable. I believe that any amount of fraud in the social welfare system is wrong and we must do everything we can to prevent it.

While overpayments as a result of claimants making mistakes amounted to the higher figure of €46 million last year, the Deputy will appreciate that some level of customer error can be expected in a system that processes 82 million payments every year and pays out €19.2 billion across 70 schemes. In addition, it should be noted that some €20m was overpaid in what are known as estate cases which relate to pensioners who were receiving a State Pension Non-Contributory where, after their death, some level of overpayment of entitlement was judged to have arisen. Overpayments from staff and administrative errors were recorded at €2.3m in 2016.

My Department is constantly improving systems and processes to minimise the risk of fraud and error and to allow claimants bring new and relevant information to our attention in a timely manner.

The recent fraud campaign will cost in the region of €206,000 when all costs are paid. Already, some 1,300 additional reports of fraud have been received over and above the same period last year. My officials have now started to examine these reports and they will be referred to the appropriate scheme area for follow-up action, where this is found to be warranted, in light of the information provided.

I agree with the Deputy that we should maintain the focus on reducing errors, but not to the exclusion of those who deliberately set out to defraud the social welfare system.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 40 answered with Question No. 35.

Labour Activation Programmes

41. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to allow the Tús scheme and the community employment schemes to retain current participants even if their term is complete (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25712/17]

46. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to ensure the community employment scheme remains operational within the communities it serves; and his views on the pivotal social good they provide and that they are not simply labour activation schemes. [25892/17]

94. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of his Department's plans for the Tús scheme and the community employment schemes (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25713/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 41, 46 and 94 together.

Community Employment (CE) and Tús are active labour market programmes with the emphasis on progression into employment and/or further education and training. Participation limits on these schemes are necessary to allow for the utilisation of places amongst qualifying persons to ensure the benefits of these schemes are available to the widest possible number of jobseekers. It is important to note that these placements are not full-time sustainable jobs. Instead, they are designed to break the cycle of unemployment and maintain work readiness, thereby improving a person's opportunities of returning to the open labour market.

The Deputies will appreciate that the welcome increase in the number of people at work and the continued reduction in Live Register numbers is a factor in recruitment to all work programmes in recent times. If any scheme is experiencing particular difficulties filling vacancies, they should contact their local DSP Intreo office for assistance.

I recently got Government approval for a number of changes to the CE scheme which will assist in broadening the availability of CE to a greater number of people on the live register and will also standardise other conditions around the length of time a person can participate on the programme. My officials are currently meeting with sponsors throughout the country to discuss the various changes to be implemented. In this context, it should be noted that I am not planning to change the current participation limit of one year on the Tús scheme.

I would like to reiterate that the Government strongly supports the work being done through these schemes and I have seen first-hand myself, over recent months, the vital role such schemes are playing in local communities, including supporting social services, across the entire country.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

Community Employment Schemes Administration

42. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to make changes to community employment schemes; the expected start date for these changes to come into operation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25939/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In the context of the falling Live Register and the continuing economic recovery, my Department undertook a review of the work programmes. The outcome of the review made various recommendations in relation to how work programmes, including Community Employment (CE) operate, as well as the overall number of places available. In this context, I have decided to progress some changes to the CE programme which will introduce clearer terms and conditions for entry to the programme and will also widen the range of people who can take part in CE schemes.

The changes I am introducing will see the general qualifying age for CE, for those on the live register, reduced from 25 to 21 years. It will also be easier for previous participants, who have exhausted their CE entitlement, to requalify as participation prior to the year 2007 will be disregarded. While participants between 21 and 55 years will be entitled to one year on the programme, this can be extended by up to 2 more years if they are engaged in a recognised training or education award that is helping them progress towards employment. All CE participants age 55 and over will be able to avail of 3 consecutive years on a CE. There will be an overall limit of 6 years from 2007 (or 7 years if on a disability payment).

I have also signalled my intention to review the rules governing the participation of older people on schemes. This review will take place within the next 3 months.

As part of the implementation of the new measures, my Department is currently consulting with key stakeholders and I expect that the implementation of the new arrangements will commence from mid-June onwards.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Departmental Information

43. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to launch information campaigns advising persons of payment pending wages or the fast tracking system for persons that sign off to take up employment or training for a short period, that is, up to 12 weeks, or family income supplement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25973/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Department of Social Protection serves a wide and diverse group of customers including families, people in employment, unemployed people, people with illnesses and disabilities, carers and older people. In more recent times, my Department has expanded its remit to provide a range of services to employers.

My Department is continuously engaging with this broad customer base to increase public awareness of its schemes and services. With this in mind, a dedicated Communications and Customer Services Unit was established within my Department whose role is to ensure information about the Department is directed appropriately to the various customer groups in an effective manner, so they can access assistance from the Department when and if required.

Since last September, a series of advertising campaigns have been undertaken including; paternity benefit, the launch of MyGovID, the extension of the treatment benefits scheme to the self-employed and most recently a campaign to raise awareness about social welfare fraud.

Advertising campaigns represent just one of the many ways in which my Department provides information to customers; engagement with formal customer representative groups, presentations at customer conferences and events, website updates, social media and participation in our jobseekers programmes are all part of the communication mix.

When planning advertising campaigns, particular focus is given where changes to schemes arise - as was the case in treatment benefits being extended to the self-employed in March this year - or where a new scheme is launched, such as paternity benefit in September 2016. However, all Department services and functions will be considered in the context of further promotional work undertaken.

Social Welfare Overpayments

44. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will review the circumstances in which persons are deemed to have inadvertently received a payment to which they may not have an entitlement and that subsequently have to repay sums, including lump sums, to an extent that may exacerbate their vulnerability especially those dependent on rent support derived from being on local authority housing lists and that may find themselves homeless; if his Department has the technology to be able to identify potential overpayments at an earlier stage thereby eliminating hardship to vulnerable families; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25970/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Overpayments of entitlement are a feature of all social protection and assistance systems. This reflects the dynamic nature of the changing eligibility and entitlements of persons in receipt of payments. Significant information system developments, including the sharing of information between agencies, have been implemented in recent years to enhance the timeliness and quality of information available to officials.

Overpayments of benefit and assistance payments can arise as a result of fraud, errors by the claimant, errors by staff and during the settlement of a claimant's estate following their death.

In all circumstances where an overpayment is assessed by my Department, the person concerned is afforded an opportunity to seek to have the underlying decision reviewed and independently assessed by the Social Welfare Appeals Office by way of appeal.

Where recovery of an overpayment is being sought or pursued, my Department engages with the person concerned and takes into account his/her circumstances. An agreed repayment plan can be put in place that will ensure that the risk of financial hardship is lessened. As the Deputy will appreciate, it is very much in the person's interest that they engage with my officials to manage the repayment arrangements.

Most overpayments are recovered by way of instalments paid over a period of years. While lump sums can be paid, this would only arise where a person offered to do so. It is not the Department's intention to make deductions that are likely to visit hardship. Even where a person does not co-operate, the level of payment cannot go below 85% of the person rate of payment with no impact on any increases for dependant adults or children.

My Department has a duty not to pay any person beyond their lawful entitlement and, in this context, my officials are required to protect public funds. Insofar as is possible, they must ensure that any sums paid in excess of a legal entitlement are returned to my Department.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Community Employment Schemes Administration

45. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to centralise

the provision of insurance for community employment schemes within his Department to reduce the costs for sponsors and schemes. [25841/17]

97. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to improve supports for the sponsors of community employment schemes; his further plans to increase the materials budget for community employment schemes, in view of rising insurance and other costs; and the way in which he plans to address cash flow issues for schemes. [25838/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 45 and 97 together.

The annual budget provided to Community Employment (CE) schemes includes an amount to cover consumable services and materials, including insurance, necessary for the effective operation of the project.

My Department has become aware in recent times of an increase in insurance premiums for CE schemes. The main reasons cited for this is an increase in claims frequency over recent years by such schemes. In the first instance, my Department recommends that schemes seek alternative quotes to ensure they get value for money. In this context, schemes are asked to be especially mindful of their obligations under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

The responsibility for insurance for CE schemes rests with the CE sponsoring organisation (the legal employer). The CE Sponsor is responsible for ensuring that all relevant health and safety requirements are adhered to.

Each CE sponsoring body is an independent contractor for all purposes and, in these circumstances, it is not possible for the Department to become an insurance agent for all schemes.

Insurance premium costs are reimbursed from the CE materials budget for the scheme. While the Department is not in a position to allocate additional monies to the materials budget in 2017, if there is a scheme experiencing particular difficulties, the sponsor should contact their local DSP office and the matter will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

The capacity to provide for any general increase in the materials budget will be examined as part of the annual budgetary process.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 46 answered with Question No. 41.

Social Welfare Code

47. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he was referring to persons that rely on social transfers from his Department to keep them out of poverty when he stated those that contribute nothing and want everything free. [25931/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): No, I was not. I firmly believe that people and families know how best to organise their own lives and make decisions for themselves and I also believe that the role of the State should be to offer a helping hand to those people and families that need it.

That is why I want the social protection system and anti-poverty policies to focus on improving and extending existing contributory benefits such as parental leave. It is why I want a strong social insurance system and the contributory principle underpinning it so that employees

and self-employed people who pay in through PRSI and in return receive benefits when they need them and that everyone who contributes benefits, for example, during periods of unemployment or illness, maternity/paternity, on retirement or if a person pre-deceases their dependents. That is why I want to reduce consistent poverty rates to pre-crisis levels and then lower. I want to do the same for child poverty.

To achieve these objectives will require a holistic set of actions comprising employment opportunities, education, wages, welfare and affordable access to public services. In this respect my Department will focus on policies such as: supporting all families in areas such as extending maternity and paternity leave and will allow couples to share it; helping to restore free education in our schools by increasing the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance; and alongside the implementation of the Action Plan for Education, provide subsidised school books/tablets to all children and extend the School Breakfast Programme to more schools every year

JobPath Implementation

48. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he has satisfied himself with the operation of the JobPath scheme, including the costs involved in the operation of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25762/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The JobPath model has a number of key features which enables my Department to monitor the service provider's performance and ensure contract compliance.

Every participant is provided with a service guarantee - a baseline level of service covering frequency of engagement, personal progression planning, geographic accessibility and in-employment support.

The service providers are subject to regular audits and inspections. In addition my Department will commission independent customer satisfaction surveys to ensure that services are being delivered satisfactorily.

The first JobPath performance report, which includes the results of the first customer satisfaction survey, was published earlier this year and is available on the department's website.

Regular on-site checks and inspections are carried out to ensure that JobPath is delivered in accordance with the contract. To date, 33 on-site inspections have been carried out at provider service delivery locations around the country, 18 to Turas Nua and 15 to Seetec locations.

The inspections monitor compliance with the service level agreement and the contract generally, including the suitability and standard of accommodation, staffing levels, customer service and customer feedback. Inspections may be notified or un-notified and will be conducted for the duration of the JobPath contract.

In relation to the cost of the service, the service is being delivered through a payment by results model. This is an important safeguard in itself, as the payment model is based on sustained employment outcomes benefitting individual Jobseekers. In addition the model has been designed so that job sustainment fees are only payable were a client of the service ceases to be entitled to claim a jobseekers related payment - during the period of employment. There is therefore an associated saving with regard to jobseeker related income supports and any employment outcomes fees paid.

Through the service jobseekers have access to a personal adviser (PA) who works with them over two phases. During the first phase, of 12 months duration, the PA provides practical assistance in searching, preparing for, securing and sustaining employment. The second phase starts if the jobseeker is successful in finding work. During this phase the personal; advisor continues to work with the jobseeker for a further period of at least three months, and up to 12 months. It will take time therefore to accumulate a sufficient number of clients (who have completed their engagement period) for complete and robust outcome data to be available: with this in mind it is intended to commence an econometric evaluation of the service at the end of 2017.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Domiciliary Care Allowance Applications

49. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Social Protection the steps he is taking to improve the processing time of applications for domiciliary care allowance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25938/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA) claims that require medical and other supporting documentation can take some time to properly assess, particularly as the opinion of one of the department's medical assessor's is routinely required.

Increasing numbers applying for DCA have been a feature of this scheme in recent years. In the 4 year period from 2013 to 2016 the number of applications has increased by 54%, from under 5,000 to almost 7,500 per annum.

In addition to the increased volumes, there has recently also been a significant increase in the complexity and length of time required to process applications. This has been impacted by a High Court ruling, following a legal challenge by an un-successful applicant, which places a greater onus on the deciding officer to provide the applicant with more detail of the reasoning used in coming to their decision.

This requirement combined with increased application volumes, which show no sign of diminishing, has impacted negatively on processing times, which currently average 16 weeks. In April 2017, 53% of applications were processed within the 15 week target.

Staffing levels in the scheme are kept under continuous review to ensure the best use of available resources.

Jobseeker's Allowance Payments

50. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will reverse the lower rate of jobseeker's payments for young persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25951/17]

51. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he is considering reversing previous cuts to young persons JSA in the upcoming budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26042/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 50 and 51 together.

In line with other EU and OECD jurisdictions where such measures feature, reduced rates for younger jobseeker's allowance recipients were first introduced in 2009 and extended to those under 26 in Budget 2014.

These measures were introduced to protect young people from welfare dependency by providing young jobseekers with a strong financial incentive to engage in education or training or to take up employment.

Should a young jobseeker on a reduced jobseeker's allowance payment participate on an education or training programme they will receive a higher weekly payment of €160. This rate will be further increased to €193 per week from September 2017. With effect from March 2017, rates of jobseeker's payments were increased for claimants of all ages as a result of measures I introduced in Budget 2017.

The CSO's latest monthly unemployment figures report that the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for persons aged 15-24 years was 12.9% in April 2017. This is a significant decrease of over 5 percentage points, from 18% in April 2016.

I am committed to ensuring my Department identifies effective measures to incentivise and support young people in finding and securing sustainable jobs. The best way to do this is through engagement processes and by incentivising them to avail of educational and training opportunities, thereby enhancing their employment prospects.

I have no plans for any further increases in rates at present. Any such changes could only be considered in a budgetary context.

Social Welfare Fraud

52. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will report on the cost of the welfare fraud campaign his Department is engaged in; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25950/17]

59. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the full cost of his high profile advertising campaign against fraud in social protection; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25953/17]

60. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will justify the expenditure on the advertising campaign against social welfare fraud in view of the resources available to his department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26039/17]

78. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Social Protection the overall estimated savings from his social welfare fraud campaign for 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25897/17]

93. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Social Protection the cost of the ongoing campaign to tackle welfare fraud; if the 12 staff members he referred to in his reply to Parliamentary Question No. 254 of 16 May 2017 work solely on the social welfare fraud campaign; if he has satisfied himself that the resources dedicated to this campaign represent an effective use of public funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25936/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 52, 59, 60, 78 and 93 together.

The Department administers over 70 separate schemes and services, which affect the lives

of almost every person in the State. In 2016, some 1.7 million applications for benefit, assistance and access to schemes were received and processed and over 82 million individual payments were made to people across all age groups and to employers. Measures to prevent and detect fraud and enhance controls across the Department's various schemes are set out in the Compliance and Anti-Fraud Strategy which covers the period 2014 – 2018.

The recent fraud campaign was designed to:

- Promote discussion on the topic of social welfare fraud;
- Encourage reporting of suspected/known social welfare fraud;
- Demonstrate that the Government and Department takes the issue of social welfare fraud very seriously; and
- Inform the wider community of the obligations on my Department to protect the integrity of the social welfare system.

The national and regional radio, print and outdoor advertising ran for a period of two weeks, with a longer timeframe of 4 to 6 weeks for digital/online advertising. The cost of the advertising campaign is €165,988 excluding VAT.

My Department did not incur any additional staffing costs arising from the campaign as staff were already in place and dedicated to control and anti-fraud work. I am very satisfied that the campaign has been effective in raising the discussion around this topic and was cost effective, as evidenced by the public support for it. In that context, it should be noted that since the launch of the campaign on 18 April last, 3,377 reports had been received from members of the public. This compares with 2,034 reports received for the same period in 2016, an increase of over 66%. These reports will be examined over the coming weeks and referred to the relevant scheme areas for appropriate follow-up action where this is warranted.

The Department has set no specific savings targets for this campaign. An overall savings target of €510 million has been set for 2017 and additional reporting from members of the public will support the Department in achieving this target.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

Social Insurance Fund Data

53. Deputy Sean Fleming asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount owed to the social insurance fund; the efforts made by his Department to collect moneys owed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25716/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): At 31 December 2016, the total amount owed to the Social Insurance Fund (SIF) was €459 million in employer debt and €89 million in customer debt. These figures are provisional pending finalisation of the SIF Financial Statements.

Employers pay into the Social Insurance Fund (SIF) at a rate of up to 10.75% of employee salaries. This payment is designed to contribute to the cost of benefits paid out of the social insurance fund. One of the benefits funded by the SIF is the provision of redundancy and insolvency-related payments in circumstances where the employer making the redundancies is unable to fund these payments itself; in the majority of cases, because the employer concerned is insolvent. In this way the payments made into the SIF by employers help to protect the in-

terests of workers when any individual employer cannot meet its obligations under law to pay salary arrears and redundancy settlements to employees who lose their jobs.

Notwithstanding that payments out of the SIF are properly made in accordance with this insurance principle, the Department pursues recovery of the amounts paid. The balance of any funds paid out but not recovered is recorded and disclosed as a debt in the financial accounts of the SIF. A dedicated debt management unit is responsible for recovering as much debt as possible in line with the Department's debt management policy. The unit seeks repayment of debt either directly from the employer (typically by means of an agreed repayment schedule) or from any liquidator that may be appointed to wind up the affairs on an insolvent business. The unit has a staff of six (5.1 full-time equivalents) and operating costs of just over €300,000. A total of €10.7 million in funds paid out of the SIF to cover redundancy related payments was recovered by the Department in 2016 (provisional figure).

The majority of employer debt relates to companies which are insolvent. In these cases, recovery of debt is pursued with liquidators through the liquidation process. The Minister for Social Protection is a preferential creditor, along with the Revenue Commissioners.

In cases where employers are not insolvent and are still trading the Department is mindful that an overly aggressive process in pursuing debt with companies that are still trading, but are nevertheless in a financially precarious position, might result in those companies being pushed into an insolvency situation which could result in further job losses. Accordingly the unit engages with employers to establish the situation on a case by case basis and seeks to recover debt on a mutually agreed basis, including setting up repayment by instalment where appropriate.

With regard to the general customer debt of €89m the Department's policy is to pursue the recovery of all sums overpaid. This is done to discourage wrongful and fraudulent claiming, to ensure that legislative provisions are enforced, particularly those relating to the proper management of the SIF, and lessening the burden on the Exchequer.

The Department raised overpayments due to the SIF in 2016 of €15.6 million and the value of recoveries of sums overpaid, in respect of 2016 and prior years, was €14 million.

Maternity Benefit Administration

54. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Social Protection further to Parliamentary Questions Nos. 161 and 162 of 17 May 2017, if he will report on the status of maternity benefit applications and the delays there are. [25949/17]

76. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Social Protection the steps he is taking to ease the backlog of claims for maternity benefit; the current waiting time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25968/17]

83. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason for the delay in the payment of maternity benefit payments; the number of outstanding payments; the time these persons have been waiting for payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25972/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 54, 76 and 83 together.

Maternity benefit is a payment made to women who are on maternity leave from work and are covered by social insurance (PRSI).

It is a payment for employed and self-employed women who satisfy certain PRSI contribution conditions.

Some 45,000 maternity benefit claims were processed last year and a similar number is expected in 2017. The rate of maternity benefit was increased to €235 in the 2017 Budget and allowances for dependent adults and children are available to those who qualify.

Maternity benefit section is currently experiencing some difficulty with processing all claims in advance of their maternity leave commencement date. Corrective actions have been taken and progress is being made. However, there are still a number of mothers that will receive their first payment up to 3 to 4 weeks after they commence their maternity leave. The number has reduced to 700 at 29 May, down from 1,100 based on a count at 22 May.

Staff are being recruited to bring the complement up to cadre. Staff have also been moved from other areas in Buncrana and Letterkenny, including the Intreo centres, to work on processing maternity claims on a temporary basis. Information section in Sligo is handling phone calls for the section, freeing up maternity benefit staff for claim processing work. Staff have also been working overtime, including Saturdays, to ensure as many claims as possible get processed and paid by their commencement date.

Once a claim is awarded, any arrears payments due issue immediately along with the first payment. Where a claim is made online, it is decided immediately providing that the conditions are met and the necessary documentation is attached. Efforts continue to be made to promote online applications and I would ask the Deputies to encourage expectant mothers to avail of this facility.

The focus remains on ensuring that all claims are processed as quickly as possible.

Social Insurance Fund Deficit

55. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Social Protection his views on the decision by his Department to write off moneys owed by employers under the insolvency and redundancy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26041/17]

98. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding the write off by his Department of moneys owed by employers under the redundancy and insolvency schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26007/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 55 and 98 together.

Employers pay into the Social Insurance Fund (SIF) at a rate of up to 10.75% of employee salaries. This payment is designed to contribute to the cost of benefits paid out of the social insurance fund.

One of the benefits funded by the SIF is the provision of redundancy related payments in circumstances where the employer making the redundancies is unable to fund these payments itself – in the majority of cases because the employer concerned is insolvent.

In this way the payments made into the SIF by all employers help to protect the interests of workers when any individual employer cannot meet its obligations under law to pay salary arrears and redundancy settlements to employees who lose their jobs.

Notwithstanding that payments out of the SIF are properly made in accordance with this

insurance principle the Department pursues recovery of the amounts paid. The Department has a dedicated debt management unit which has responsibility for recovering as much as possible of the amount paid out in redundancy related payments. It does this through raising a debt against the employer concerned and then seeking payment of this debt either directly from the employer (typically by means of an agreed repayment schedule) or from any liquidator that may be appointed to wind up the affairs on an insolvent business. A total of €10.7 million in employer debt was recovered by the Department in 2016 (provisional figure).

The majority of debt relates to companies which are insolvent. The total employer debt to the SIF at 31 December, 2016 stood at €459 million (provisional figure). Almost two-thirds of the debt originated during the recession years of 2008 to 2013 and three-quarters of current outstanding employer debt is in respect of insolvent companies, i.e. companies which are no longer trading. In company insolvencies, the Minister for Social Protection is a preferential creditor, along with the Revenue Commissioners. The amount recoverable depends on a funds being generated during the liquidation process. Given these circumstances, the Department estimates that up to 90 per cent of employer debt is unlikely to be recoverable..

The process of debt write-offs is part of the proper management of debt and allows resources to be targeted at debts which have a greater chance of recovery. Debt is written-off at the conclusion of the liquidation process – a process that can take up to seven years and only takes place where the Department has completed all appropriate checks and is completely satisfied that the debt is not recoverable. Debt write-offs are carried out under delegated sanction from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Following a recommendation from the Comptroller and Auditor General, a comprehensive review of employer debt to the SIF was completed in 2016. This resulted in a cumulative write-off of €95 million in the SIF financial statements for 2014 to 2016.

The Department is currently reviewing its employer debt policy and practices, taking into account the best practice guide for collection of debt by public bodies published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in January 2017.

The following table outlines employer debt, recoveries and write-offs for the years 2011 – 2016:

Redundancy & Insolvency Payments Scheme						
	2011*	2012*	2013	2014	2015	2016**
	€m	€m	€m	€m	€m	€m
Payments (debt incurred)	87.1	117.3	98.65	82.1	40.9	38.3
Recoveries	3.78	5.89	7	10.2	7.4	10.7
Amount written-off	8.9	0	24.2	63.5	18.7	12.8

These figures are taken from the published SIF Financial Statements.

* *The figures for 2011 and 2012 were revised following a review of employer debt.*

** *2016 figures are provisional, pending finalisation of the SIF Financial Statements.*

State Pension (Contributory) Eligibility

56. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will reverse the changes to the eligibility criteria to the State (contributory) pension which was introduced in 2012, which is extremely discriminatory against women, in particular. [25893/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Each year more people are living to pension age and living longer in retirement. As a result of this demographic change, the number of State pension recipients is increasing year on year. This has significant implications for the future costs of State pension provision, and demographic change alone is expected to increase spending on pensions by over €220 million this year, not including the impact of rate increases.

The current rate bands applying to the State pension (contributory) were introduced from September 2012, replacing previous rates introduced in 2000. These rate bands more accurately reflect the social insurance contributions history of a person.

It is estimated that to revert to the previous bands would cost at least €60 million in 2018, and this annual cost would increase by an estimated €10 million each following year. The main beneficiaries from such a decision would be better off pensioners who do not qualify for means-tested pension payments, and who did not make sufficient contributions into the Social Insurance Fund to qualify for a full rate contributory pension.

Prior to the introduction of the current rate bands, a person reaching retirement age with a yearly average of 47 contributions (out of a maximum of 52) qualified for the same rate of payment as someone with a yearly average of 20 contributions, despite their much more significant PRSI contribution record, and regardless of their means. A person with 52 weeks of contributions paid every year of their working life received a weekly State pension of only €4.50 more than someone with a yearly average of 20 PRSI contributions, amounting up to 95% of the maximum contributory pension rate. The rate of payment does not include rent allowance, household benefits or fuel allowance, which would be additional payments where applicable.

Where people who were unattached to the labour market during most of their adult lives cannot qualify for a contributory pension in their own right as they have paid few or no contributions, or cannot qualify for a full rate as a result of an intermittent PRSI record, the social protection system provides alternative methods of supporting such pensioners in old age. If their spouse has a contributory pension, they may qualify for an Increase for a Qualified Adult amounting up to 90% of a full rate pension, which by default is paid directly to them. Alternatively, they may qualify for a means-tested State Pension (non-contributory), amounting up to 95% of the maximum contributory pension rate. The rate of payment does not include rent allowance, household benefits or fuel allowance, which would be additional payments where applicable.

The Actuarial Review of the Social Insurance Fund in 2012 confirmed that the Fund provides better value to female rather than male contributors. This is due to the redistributive nature of the Fund.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

State Bodies Mergers

57. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Social Protection the actions his Department has taken in response to concerns raised by MABS and CIS regarding restructuring plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25895/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In February, the Board of Citizens Information Board (CIB) decided the new governance arrangements for local service delivery would comprise of sixteen boards, eight Citizens Information Services (CIS) and 8 Money Advice and Budgeting Services (MABS).

Before making its final decision, CIB had engaged in an extensive and comprehensive consultation process, involving service delivery companies and representative organisations and groups. This included representative groups having audiences with the Board itself.

In recent months, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection held hearings and received submissions from the various stakeholders, and issued a draft report. Cognisant of the various concerns expressed to the Committee, CIB undertook a series of regional consultations with stakeholders throughout May, to discuss and examine key aspects of implementing the new sixteen board model.

These sessions were attended by 127 representatives of local company Boards and 223 representatives of management, staff and volunteers of local services. Each session was chaired by an independent facilitator. Attendees had an opportunity to raise any concerns about service delivery under the new model. CIB reports that these engagements were well received and there was considerable support for the planned restructuring.

In addition, my Department understands that CIB intends to host further consultations over the summer months on key areas such as the role of volunteers, the delivery of consistent high quality services countrywide and the preservation of the fundamentally valuable local community focus and support ethos within the new model. CIB will also consider these findings in the development of its Volunteer Strategy.

CIB has established an Implementation Group, with cross-sectoral representation, to assist with the governance reorganisation and has committed to carry out a full Cost Benefit Analysis on the sixteen company model.

My Department is satisfied that CIB is making genuine efforts to allay the concerns of staff, boards and volunteers and is seeking to find ways to best embed the historically strong community ethos in the new governance structure.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Carer's Allowance Appeals

58. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Social Protection the average time it takes for a file to be sent from the carer's allowance section in Sligo to the social welfare appeals office in Dublin once the file has been requested by the latter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25766/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Carer's Allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment, made to persons who are providing full-time care and attention to a person who has a disability such that they require that level of care.

During 2016, the CA section which is based in my Department's office in Longford, processed 31,881 applications. Each decision notice offered the recipient a right of review and appeal.

When a person appeals a decision, the Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO), who are independent of the Department, send a notice of the appeal to the CA section requesting a statement from the deciding officer showing the extent to which the facts and contentions advanced by the appellant are admitted or disputed.

At that stage a different deciding officer reviews in full the original decision which is under

appeal and any additional statement or evidence provided as part of the appeal. It is quite often the case that additional information and evidence is supplied by the appellant at this stage, which may require further investigation by a Social Welfare Inspector or Medical Assessor.

This review can take some time and can sometimes result in a revised decision by the deciding officer which means an appeal is no longer required. In 2016, 751 such cases were successful on review, resulting in the withdrawal of the appeal. In another 2,581 cases, the original decision was not revised and a statement on behalf of the deciding officer was sent to the SWAO to assist in their consideration of the appeal.

The average time taken between my Department receiving these requests from the SWAO and issuing the statements to the SWAO was 44 days; this figure includes time spent re-investigating and reviewing these cases.

Reducing this waiting time is a priority for my Department and we are working hard to make this happen. Operational processes, procedures and the organisation of work are continually reviewed to ensure that appeal processing capability is maximised.

Questions Nos. 59 and 60 answered with Question No. 52.

Rent Supplement Scheme Data

61. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of recipients of rent supplement that are aged 18 to 24 years of age, by county, in each of the years 2014 to 2016, and to date in 2017; the measures he is taking with his colleague the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government to address recent reports of a 78% increase in homelessness in the 18 to 24 year old age group since 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25714/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Rent supplement plays a vital role in housing families and individuals, with the scheme supporting 43,700 recipients for which the Government has provided €253 million for in 2017. There are approximately 1,800 rent supplement recipients aged 18 to 24 years old. A breakdown of these young customers, on a county basis for the period 2014 to date, is provided in the table.

As part of Budget 2017, I announced a reduction in the minimum contribution for young people in receipt of rent supplement and reduced rates of weekly social welfare payment from January 2017. This measure provides for an increase in the weekly income of young people affected by up to €20 per week at a cost of €5 million.

Support may also be provided to persons in receipt of rent supplement or HAP towards rent deposits or rent in advance, which is an important assistance to those on low incomes who are at risk of, or who are homeless. In 2016, my Department made some 2,800 payments of rent deposits/rent in advance at a cost of almost €1.8 million, of which some 460 payments were to young people aged 24 and under, at cost of over €293,000.

I can assure the Deputy that there is ongoing engagement between my Department and the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government in relation to ongoing supports for those in or facing homelessness, including the ongoing transfer of rent supplement recipients to the HAP scheme which is now available throughout the country.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

County	Dec-14	Dec-15	Dec-16	Apr-17
CARLOW	99	65	38	21
CAVAN	42	44	49	31
CLARE	112	49	21	11
CORK	599	354	250	157
DONEGAL	110	56	17	6
DUBLIN	1,845	1,162	1,088	671
GALWAY	283	197	145	89
KERRY	143	112	120	74
KILDARE	236	150	103	68
KILKENNY	97	31	17	8
LAOIS	96	75	84	43
LEITRIM	20	24	23	12
LIMERICK	218	74	67	55
LONGFORD	39	27	27	12
LOUTH	219	83	44	25
MAYO	123	91	71	40
MEATH	141	87	52	35
MONAGHAN	23	9	5	3
OFFALY	90	44	24	15
ROSCOMMON	40	40	43	31
SLIGO	42	33	20	9
TIPPERARY	213	152	68	32
WATERFORD	144	87	45	35
WESTMEATH	132	99	103	57
WEXFORD	261	201	204	137
WICKLOW	162	125	144	99
Total	5,529	3,471	2,872	1,776

Number of rent supplement Recipients Aged 18 – 24 from 2014 to April 2017

Back to Work Enterprise Allowance Scheme

62. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason his Department is encouraging recipients of social welfare payments to become self-employed through the back to work enterprise allowance scheme, in view of the amount of bogus self-employment in the construction sector and the loss to the State related to the wrongful designation of workers (details supplied); and when he plans to cease this practice. [25976/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) scheme enables my Department to work with people who have found themselves dependent on the welfare system for various reasons but who have an idea or have identified an opportunity to start their own business. The participants on the scheme have evolved their enterprises and developed their ideas with the assistance of Departmental Case Officers and Enterprise Officers in a Local Development Company (LDC).

In 2016 a review of the BTWEA scheme was conducted. Overall, the review found that the scheme offers effective support for people who are long-term unemployed and who are interested in self-employment as a route to entering the labour market. The scheme plays a useful role in supporting the development of new enterprises.

My Department plays an important role in encouraging people to consider self-employment. The LDCs also play a key role in supporting local communities and entrepreneurs to develop new business ideas and to enhance existing enterprises. Equally, the LEOs provide a range of complementary supports to people who want to start-up or grow a business. It is through these services working together with new businesses that the legitimacy and viability of a business is examined prior to approval for BTWEA.

Research demonstrated that the numbers returning from self-employment to the Live Register, after participating on the scheme, are low. Based on the comparison of the BTWEA participants to a control group of similar jobseekers who did not choose the scheme as an option, the BTWEA participant was over twice as likely to remain off the Live Register six months after the payments on the scheme had ceased. This trend continues when examined following an 18 month period after the payments ceasing.

The part played by the BTWEA in supporting the long-term unemployed and other welfare recipients to take up self-employment opportunities is significant. As the Deputy will appreciate, new small businesses and entrepreneurs play a vital role in economic development and new job growth.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Widow's Pension Eligibility

63. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to extend the widow's pension to unmarried couples in certain circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25934/17]

71. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to allow unmarried partners qualify for the widow's pension on the death of their partner in certain circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25899/17]

92. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will make the widow's pension payable to unmarried couples in certain circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25894/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 63, 71 and 92 together.

In order to qualify for a widow's, widower's or surviving civil partner's contributory pension, a person must satisfy certain social insurance conditions and be a widow, widower or (since 1 January 2011) a surviving civil partner, and not be in a cohabiting relationship. The contributions must have been paid on one of the spouse/civil partners' social insurance records and all must have been made before the death of the spouse/civil partner. Once in payment, the pension remains payable while the person remains widowed or a surviving civil partner.

The legal context governing relationships such as marriage is broader than the social protection system. Where that context changes, the social welfare code is examined for appropriate changes, e.g., the scheme was introduced for widows on 1 January 1936; it was extended to widowers on 28 October 1994 in light of gender equality issues that had not been considered in the 1930s; and extended to surviving civil partners from 1 January 2011 following the introduction of civil partnership.

Entering into a marriage or civil partnership is a legal act, which confers both rights and

obligations on both parties, which do not exist in a legal sense between co-habiting couples. This is among the reasons that the introduction of civil partnership and the subsequent extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples were of such significance. Widows, widowers and surviving civil partners, who become bereaved, therefore, in addition to their personal loss, also lose someone who had legal duties towards them. In some cases those legal duties were, in part, financial in nature, and the social welfare code recognises that potential loss by providing a pension to them, subject to certain conditions.

A surviving cohabitant who was not married to their deceased former partner may be entitled to other social welfare payments if he or she has an income need, e.g., One-Parent Family Payment, Jobseekers Benefit or Allowance or Family Income Supplement. Payment of Child Benefit would continue, where applicable.

In terms of other income supports, supplementary welfare allowance is a means tested weekly payment, subject to certain terms and conditions, which provides a basic income support to eligible people whose means are insufficient to meet their needs.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

Community Employment Schemes Administration

64. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to improve awareness of community employment schemes for those on the live register and other eligible schemes; his further plans for a public awareness campaign; and if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties that the JobsIreland website is causing for those applying to community employment schemes. [25839/17]

89. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way in which he envisages that the referral process of persons to community employment schemes will be carried out, further to the latest report into community employment schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25966/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 64 and 89 together.

My Department provides a range of activation supports and programmes catering for long-term unemployed jobseekers and those most distant from the labour market. These schemes help to break the cycle of unemployment and improve a person's chances of returning to the labour market. Jobseekers receive information about all available employment support options, including Community Employment (CE), through the Intreo Service. Jobseekers receive one-to-one support from a case officer and all available and suitable options are discussed.

Sponsors can also promote their scheme vacancies within their local communities. At a local level, various methods of promoting CE have been arranged between my Department and local CE schemes, including targeting potentially eligible jobseekers to attend a CE Job-fare, where details of CE vacancies and employment opportunities are provided.

In addition CE sponsors can advertise their vacancies free-of-charge on the Department's JobsIreland website, www.jobsireland.ie. The process of posting vacancies is relatively straightforward and a tailored video is available online to assist sponsors. There are currently over 1,500 CE vacancies advertised on the site. These are visible to anyone who logs onto the site and users can narrow the search by location. Recent improvements were made to improve the way CE vacancies are displayed. Further enhancements to the website are planned. My De-

partment apologises to users for any inconvenience caused pending full implementation of the new JobsIreland service, which will ultimately provide a much better service than the original website. Anyone experiencing difficulties with the website can contact the National Contact Centre on 1890 800 024 or email for assistance.

Referrals to CE vacancies are made by case officers in the local Intreo Centres and I have no plans to change this process. However, the referral process will be greatly facilitated following the planned integration of JobsIreland with my Department's Activation Case Management System.

It is reasonable to assume that the difficulties in filling CE vacancies are also related to the significant drop in the Live Register over the last year or so arising from the much improved labour market. Any sponsor who has any recruitment concerns should contact their nearest Intreo Centre who will provide assistance.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

Construction Industry

65. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated loss in employers' PRSI payments to his Department for the year ending 31 December 2015 in view of the amount of bogus self-employment within the construction sector, which has been identified in a report (details supplied), in which it has identified a loss of €83 million in tax and PRSI payments to the State; and the mechanism he or his departmental officials have put in place to end this PRSI avoidance measure by unscrupulous employers in the construction sector that only engage workers on a bogus self-employed basis. [25975/17]

84. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection when the report on the intermediary type employment structures and self-employment arrangements will be released; and if this report is essentially bogus self employment in the construction industry. [25930/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 65 and 84 together.

I am aware of the report on 'bogus self-employment' that the Deputy refers to. It was submitted by TASC to the interdepartmental group on disguised employment as part of its public consultation. The interdepartmental working group, comprising officials from the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Finance and the Revenue Commissioners, has been examining the issue of disguised employment. To inform the work of the group, a public consultation was undertaken in 2016. The focus of the consultation was on the use of intermediary-type employment structures and self-employment arrangements, such as managed and personal services companies and their impact on income tax and PRSI. This includes situations where an individual establishes a company to provide his or her services to an employer, but who is dependent on, and under the control of, a single employer.

The consultation received 23 submissions from interested parties, including employers, trade unions, professional bodies and individuals. The working group is currently finalising its report. I understand that the report will be submitted to the Minister for Finance and I very shortly.

I look forward to seeing the report and I will then consider, along with my colleague the Minister for Finance, what steps may be required to address any issues arising.

With regard to the current methods used to identify and address misclassification of workers as self-employed, Department inspectors carry out visits to a wide range of businesses, (including but not limited to construction sector businesses) as part of their on-going compliance operations. In certain instances inspections are undertaken jointly with other State agencies such as the Revenue Commissioners and the Workplace Relations Commission. Such inspections are fact-finding visits as a result of which evidence of compliance or non-compliance may be detected. Where evidence of non-compliance or misclassification of employment status is detected this will be pursued. Where details of specific cases are supplied to the Department, they are investigated and the insurability of the person concerned is determined.

Arrears of PRSI are calculated and collected where incidences of misclassification of workers as self-employed are detected. Where an employee has been misclassified as self-employed, his/her social insurance record will be updated to reflect the correct rate of social insurance. Under the provisions of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act, there are specific offences in relation to employment contributions, their remittance and the maintenance of prescribed wages and employment records. On conviction, fines and or imprisonment can ultimately be imposed.

There are no quantitative data on the incidence of bogus self-employment. It is therefore not possible to estimate the loss in employers' PRSI payments to my department for the year ending 31 December 2015.

Employment Support Services

66. Deputy Willie O'Dea asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to assist those that are long-term unemployed back into the workforce; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25711/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Government policy to reduce unemployment is twofold. First, through policies set out in the Action Plan for Jobs, to create an environment in which business can succeed and create jobs; and second, through Pathways to Work to ensure that as many as possible of these new jobs and other vacancies that arise in our economy are filled by people taken from the Live Register, and in particular the long-term unemployed.

Reflecting the impact of government policy, and the overall improvement in the labour market, the long term unemployment rate has fallen rapidly since it peaked at 9.5% in Q1 2012. The most recent figure is 3.6% in Q1 2017, and a strong downward trend continues.

The Pathways to Work 2016-2020 strategy continues to prioritise actions for the long-term unemployed. This includes the payment-by-results services of JobPath to engage more systematically with the long-term unemployed; providing targeted wage subsidies under JobsPlus; and reserved places for long-term unemployed jobseekers on employment and training programmes.

I am confident these measures, and continuing economic recovery, will support further reductions in long-term unemployment and add to the substantial improvements that have already been seen over the last few years.

School Meals Programme

67. Deputy Mattie McGrath asked the Minister for Social Protection the funding provided

to schools in County Tipperary for the school meals scheme; if he will expand the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24779/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The school meals programme provides funding towards the provision of food to 1,460 schools and organisations benefitting over 200,000 children at a total cost of some €47.7 million in 2017. As part of Budget 2017, the funding for the scheme was substantially increased this year by an additional €5.7 million (representing almost 14% over the previous year's allocation) which will benefit over 50,000 children. For the 2016/2017 academic year, a total of some €1.2 million has been allocated to 43 schools in Tipperary benefitting over 4,360 children.

In recent years priority for new applications for funding had been given to schools which are part of the DEIS programme. From September 2016 additional funding is available to all DEIS schools to provide breakfast and lunch to the majority of pupils. Budget 2017 funding also provides for the inclusion in the scheme, from September 2017, of up to 240 new schools supporting 47,000 children. This includes support to those schools being brought into DEIS and the extension of the scheme to breakfast clubs in non-DEIS schools, which is the first time in many years that increased payments will be provided outside of DEIS. The 240 schools selected, following engagement with the Department of Education and Skills, have been contacted by my Department to join the scheme from September. Those selected include 19 schools in Tipperary with a combined enrolment of over 3,100 children, of which applications have been received from 13 schools to date.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 68 answered with Question No. 38.

Drug Treatment Programmes

69. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status for the specific community employment drug rehabilitation programmes in view of recent changes to community employment eligibility and so on; and if his attention has been drawn to the special skill sets required for the supervisors on those particular schemes. [25901/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I want to assure the Deputy that the status of the specific Community Employment (CE) Drug Rehabilitation Programme will not be affected by the proposed changes in CE eligibility. The Drugs Programme Framework, including the revised special conditions under which CE is delivered, will continue to apply. The CE eligibility conditions will continue to be waived for participants who are referred to a CE drug rehabilitation place. The entry age for a drug rehabilitation place is set at 18 years of age.

As the Deputy will be aware, the focus of the CE drug schemes is on rehabilitation, education and training and personal/social development. Multi-agency co-operation – with the HSE and Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs) - is essential for the achievement of successful outcomes of participants. The inter-agency DSP CE Drug Advisory Group (DAG) works to ensure that the programme meets the needs of the referred target group and remains relevant and effective. In addition to participation on the dedicated schemes, referred clients may also take up places on mainstream CE schemes.

The skills set for a CE Supervisors on the drug rehabilitation programme have been reviewed and updated in recognition of the competencies required to deliver a drug rehabilitation programme. The revised skill set was agreed with the DSP CE DAG. Furthermore, as part of

the revised conditions and to ensure the effective delivery of the drug programme, the “support worker” element of programme delivery has been strengthened and the role expanded to enable mainstream CE participants, with an interest in addiction, to apply to join a rehabilitation scheme and pursue relevant training and development.

The Deputy should note that at the end of Dec. 2016, there were 1,125 participants on drug rehabilitation places on CE. This includes 987 participants referred for rehabilitation and 138 support workers who support the delivery of the places.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Child Benefit Eligibility

70. **Deputy Shane Cassells** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to extend child benefit entitlement to parents of full-time students in second level education that are over 18 years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25837/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Child Benefit is a monthly payment made to families with children in respect of all qualified children up to the age of 16 years. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children up to their 18th birthday who are in full-time education, or who have a disability. Child Benefit is currently paid to 623,135 families in respect of some 1.2 million children, with an estimated expenditure of over €2 billion in 2017.

Budget 2009 reduced the age for eligibility for Child Benefit from 19 years to less than 18 years. A value for money review of child income supports, published by the Department of Social Protection in 2010, found that the participation pattern of children in education supports the current age limit for Child Benefit.

Extending Child Benefit entitlement to parents of full time students in second level education that are over 18 years of age would not be a targeted approach given the universality of Child Benefit. The adoption of such a proposal would have significant cost implications and would have to be considered in an overall budgetary context.

Families on low incomes can avail of a number of social welfare schemes that support children in full-time education until the age of 22, including:

- qualified child increases (IQCs) with primary social welfare payments;
- family income supplement (FIS) for low-paid employees with children;
- the back to school clothing and footwear allowance for low income families (paid at the full-time second level education rate).

I am satisfied these schemes provide targeted assistance that is directly linked with household income and thereby supports low-income families with older children participating in full-time education.

Question No. 71 answered with Question No. 63.

Child Benefit Eligibility

72. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Social Protection his Department’s definition of a “child” in view of its interpretations under qualified child and child benefit payments;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25898/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The legislation underpinning the definition of a child for the purposes of Child Benefit are contained in Sections 219 and 220 of the 2005 Social Welfare Consolidation Act.

As a universal payment Child Benefit provides assistance to eligible families in recognition of the extra costs associated with raising children.

Increases for a Qualified Child (IQCs) are paid as child-related supplements to most weekly social welfare payments in recognition of the need for greater incomes among benefit-dependent households with dependent children.

IQC payments do not of themselves constitute a specific social welfare scheme and entitlement to the appropriate primary adult payment must be established in the first instance.

The legislation is scheme specific because each scheme has a different set of objectives and qualifying criteria.

Extending Child Benefit entitlement to parents of full time students over 18 years of age would not be a targeted approach given the universality of Child Benefit. The adoption of such a proposal would have significant cost implications and would have to be considered in an overall budgetary context.

Families on low incomes can avail of a number of social welfare schemes that support children in full-time education until the age of 22, including:

- qualified child increases (IQCs) with primary social welfare payments;
- family income supplement (FIS) for low-paid employees with children;
- the back to school clothing and footwear allowance for low income families (paid at the full-time second level education rate).

I am satisfied these schemes provide targeted assistance that is directly linked with household income and thereby supports low-income families with older children participating in full-time education.

State Pensions Reform

73. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection if, in view of his interest in those who get up early in the morning, he will give a commitment to ending the pension inequality that has emerged due to cuts to the State pension in previous budgets and is experienced by many who spent many years getting up early in the morning; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25954/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The overall concern in recent years has been to protect the value of weekly social welfare rates. Expenditure on pensions, at approximately €7 billion, is the largest block of expenditure in my Department, representing over 36% of overall expenditure. Due to demographic changes, my Department's spending on older people is increasing year on year. Maintaining the rate of the State pension and other payments is critical in protecting people from poverty.

Each year more people are living to pension age and living longer in retirement. As a result

of this demographic change, the number of State pension recipients is increasing by approximately 17,000 annually. This has significant implications for the future costs of State pension provision which are currently increasing by approximately €1 billion every 5 years. The purpose of changes to the State pension is to make the pension system more sustainable in the context of increasing life expectancy.

Accordingly, the conditions for the State pension (contributory), which is the pension based on PRSI contributions, are reviewed on an ongoing basis. A number of significant reforms to State pensions were introduced in recent years which has allowed my Department to maintain the value of the State pension, and indeed increase it in the last two Budgets.

Where people who were unattached to the labour market during most of their adult lives cannot qualify for a contributory pension in their own right as they have paid few or no contributions, or cannot qualify for a full rate as a result of an intermittent PRSI record, the social protection system provides alternative methods of supporting such pensioners in old age. If their spouse has a contributory pension, they may qualify for an Increase for a Qualified Adult amounting up to 90% of a full rate pension, which by default is paid directly to them. Alternatively, they may qualify for a means-tested State Pension (non-contributory), amounting up to 95% of the maximum contributory pension rate. The rate of payment does not include rent allowance, household benefits or fuel allowance, which would be paid as additional payments where applicable.

Where the pensioner is widowed, there is a pension which is based on either their spouses' PRSI record or their own, and generally at the maximum contributory pension rate.

It should be noted that the average personal payments made by my Department to men and women of this age are close to parity, with a differential of 2%, and this is reflected in CSO figures which show women over 65 are 0.3% more likely to be at risk of poverty than their male counterparts (10.8% compared to 10.5%), and men over 65 are 0.3% more likely than women of that age to be in consistent poverty (2.9% compared to 2.6%). Most people will understand that such small differentials are statistically insignificant, and when it comes to the main domestic social indicators of poverty, men and women over 65 are at parity.

It might also be noted that both of these indicators show that men and women over 65 are far less likely to be in poverty than working-age people, who are the ones funding pensions on a pay as you go basis through current PRSI deductions, as 16.9% of the general population are at risk of poverty, and 8.7% are in consistent poverty.

The National Pensions Framework (2010) proposed that a "Total Contributions Approach" (TCA) should replace the yearly average approach, for new pensioners from 2020. The aim of this approach is to make the rate of contributory pension more closely match contributions made by a person. Officials of my Department are currently working on the development of the TCA with a view to making proposals for consideration later in the year. This is a very significant reform with considerable legal, administrative, and technical elements in its implementation. An important element in the final design of the scheme will be the position of people who have gaps in their contribution records for various reasons, and this factor is being considered very carefully in developing this reform. Following completion of the Actuarial Review of the Social Insurance Fund later this year, a refined proposal will be developed. My Department will conduct a period of consultation with relevant stakeholders including interest groups, representative bodies and the Oireachtas. Following the consultation period, I will submit a proposal to Government seeking approval of the new approach.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals Waiting Times

74. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he has satisfied himself that adequate resources are in place to ensure minimum waiting times in respect of decisions on appeal in respect of various payments; if every effort is being made to reduce such waiting times to the minimum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25969/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The average appeal processing times for all appeals determined from 2015 to date in 2017 broken down by all social welfare scheme types is outlined in the tables below. My Department, like all Government departments and agencies is required to operate within a staff ceiling figure and a commensurate administrative staffing budget, which for this Department has involved reductions in staff. The staffing needs for all areas within the Department, including the Social Welfare Appeals Office and all areas involved in the processing of appeals, are continuously reviewed, taking account of workloads, management priorities and the ongoing need to respond to new increasing demands in a wide range of services. This is to ensure that the best use is made of all available resources with a view to providing an efficient service to those who rely on the schemes operated by the Department.

Appeal processing times are kept under constant scrutiny by the Chief Appeals Officer. The Deputy will be aware that significant effort and resources have been devoted in recent years to reducing the length of the time taken to finalise an appeal and that as a consequence processing times have improved quite considerably.

The overall average processing time, across all schemes, for appeals requiring an oral hearing reduced from 52.5 weeks in 2011 to 25.5 weeks in 2015, 24.1 weeks in 2016 and 24.4 weeks to date in 2017. The overall average time taken to finalise appeals decided by way of a summary decision has also improved in recent years from a peak of 25.1 weeks in 2011 to 18.1 weeks in 2015, 17.6 weeks in 2016 and 18.1 weeks to date in 2017.

The quasi-judicial nature of the appeals system means that there are inevitable time-lags involved. The time taken is proportionate to the complexity of many of the issues under appeal which require a high level of judgement, and the need to ensure due process and natural justice. The system is designed to be flexible and fair and allows for review and submission of further information at all stages which is to the benefit of the appellant.

The Chief Appeals Officer has advised me that appeal processing times will continue to be a priority for her office.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Appeals processing times by scheme 01/01/2015 – 31/12/2015

	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
Blind Person's Pension	21.1	30.7
Carers Allowance	20.6	25.9
Carers Benefit	19.7	21.8
Child Benefit	24.8	34.7
Disability Allowance	15.8	21.4
Illness Benefit	26.3	33.1
Partial Capacity Benefit	25.7	43.4
Domiciliary Care Allowance	21.7	28.7

Questions - Written Answers

	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
Deserted Wives Benefit	19.7	26.2
Deserted Wives Allowance	-	16.2
Farm Assist	21.0	28.6
Bereavement Grant	65.7	26.0
Death Benefit (Pension)	-	22.6
Family Income Supplement	19.4	27.7
Invalidity Pension	26.2	28.4
Liable Relatives	22.8	31.2
Maternity Benefit	22.6	17.5
One Parent Family Payment	22.9	33.9
State Pension (Contributory)	26.0	46.0
State Pension (Non-Contributory)	20.4	30.8
State Pension (Transition)	80.1	53.4
Occupational Injury Benefit	20.3	35.0
Disablement Pension	23.7	35.3
Incapacity Supplement	41.2	51.5
Guardian's Payment (Con)	18.2	27.5
Guardian's Payment (Non-Con)	18.7	31.0
Jobseeker's Allowance (Means)	15.8	26.0
Jobseeker's Allowance	15.2	21.9
JA/JB Fraud Control	-	46.1
BTW Family Dividend	14.1	-
Jobseeker's Transitional	12.9	21.3
Recoverable Benefits & Assistance	21.0	30.3
Jobseeker's Benefit	14.3	21.2
Pre-Retirement Allowance	15.0	-
Treatment Benefit	17.9	-
Carer's Support Grant *	21.2	23.6
Insurability of Employment	47.6	69.4
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	13.1	23.5
Survivor's Pension (Con)	24.1	46.6
Survivor's Pension (Non-con)	23.7	38.3
Widows Parent Grant	18.4	-
All Appeals	18.1	25.5

* Previously called Respite Care Grant

	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
Blind Person's Pension	18.2	33.8
Carers Allowance	17.6	21.6
Carers Benefit	20.7	22.4
Child Benefit	22.1	38.2
Disability Allowance	14.6	20.1
Illness Benefit	27.2	34.3
Partial Capacity Benefit	27.3	33.6
Domiciliary Care Allowance	24.3	30.6

	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
Deserted Wives Benefit	13.0	32.8
Farm Assist	21.9	26.0
Bereavement Grant	23.1	-
Death Benefit (Pension)	19.7	-
Liabile Relatives	14.0	16.9
Family Income Supplement	20.4	25.5
Invalidity Pension	21.3	28.2
Maternity Benefit	18.9	21.7
One Parent Family Payment	21.7	31.9
State Pension (Contributory)	25.6	45.9
State Pension (Non-Contributory)	22.7	32.9
State Pension (Transition)	67.7	61.3
Occupational Injury Benefit	25.0	31.9
Disablement Pension	25.8	26.8
Incapacity Supplement	27.7	50.9
Guardian's Payment (Con)	15.8	24.5
Guardian's Payment (Non-Con)	18.4	23.3
Jobseeker's Allowance (Means)	16.7	25.5
Jobseeker's Allowance	16.0	20.9
BTW Family Dividend	21.0	-
Jobseeker's Transitional	19.0	22.3
Recoverable Benefits & Assistance	32.5	31.6
Jobseeker's Benefit	16.0	27.2
Treatment Benefit	17.1	-
Carer's Support Grant *	18.1	23.3
Insurability of Employment	36.6	85.7
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	15.0	24.1
Survivor's Pension (Con)	16.6	28.8
Survivor's Pension (Non-con)	18.4	23.4
Widows Parent Grant	23.5	63.8
All Appeals	17.6	24.1

* Previously called Respite Care Grant

	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
Blind Person's Pension	16.2	30.1
Carers Allowance	19.6	22.7
Carers Benefit	16.3	21.2
Child Benefit	21.2	26.1
Disability Allowance	15.6	20.9
Illness Benefit	23.4	29.9
Partial Capacity Benefit	40.9	35.4
Domiciliary Care Allowance	23.7	29.9
Deserted Wives Benefit	-	13.7
Farm Assist	21.9	22.1

	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
Bereavement Grant	15.1	-
Death Benefit (Pension)	102.1	-
Family Income Supplement	17.7	34.9
Invalidity Pension	15.2	20.6
Liable Relatives	18.0	24.1
Maternity Benefit	17.6	13.2
One Parent Family Payment	25.9	30.8
State Pension (Contributory)	25.7	36.2
State Pension (Non-Contributory)	22.1	35.0
State Pension (Transition)	-	81.4
Occupational Injury Benefit	14.5	32.4
Disablement Pension	18.2	29.4
Incapacity Supplement	54.2	56.9
Guardian's Payment (Con)	19.1	19.1
Guardian's Payment (Non-Con)	12.9	-
Jobseeker's Allowance (Means)	16.2	24.5
Jobseeker's Allowance	15.5	23.6
BTW Family Dividend	17.6	41.1
Jobseeker's Transitional	15.2	29.4
Recoverable Benefits & Assistance	31.9	-
Jobseeker's Benefit	15.7	18.8
Carer's Support Grant	15.8	23.7
Treatment Benefit	14.0	-
Insurability of Employment	38.1	115.5
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	18.1	24.5
Survivor's Pension (Con)	17.8	21.6
Survivor's Pension (Non-con)	18.2	20.6
Widowed Parent Grant	14.1	-
All Appeals	18.1	24.4

* Previously called Respite Care Grant

Pension Provisions

75. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will review the pension provisions for foster parents that have to be in the home when carrying out this vital role but are only entitled to credits while the children in their care are under 12 years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25940/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The home-makers scheme makes qualification for a higher rate of State pension (contributory) easier for those who take time out of the workforce for caring duties. The scheme, which was introduced in and took effect for periods from 1994, allows up to 20 years spent caring for children under 12 years of age (or caring for incapacitated people over that age) to be disregarded in the calculation of the yearly average of the pensioner. This will generally have the effect of increasing the yearly average of the pensioner, and may result in a higher rate of pension, depending on their circumstances.

Claims continue to be subject to the standard qualifying conditions for State pension contributory also being satisfied, including the requirement that 520 contributions be paid.

Foster parents are entitled to the benefits of the homemakers scheme, on the same basis as other homemakers, and will qualify if the carer is in receipt of Child Benefit. If the foster parent is not in receipt of Child Benefit they can still qualify for the home-makers scheme if the caring periods are confirmed by TUSLA (these are cases where caring is for a short period of time).

The scheme is limited to the age of 12 (except where the child is incapacitated), and most children over that age will be in secondary school until mid-afternoon. This should facilitate such foster parents returning to the workforce, either on a part-time basis, or by availing of a few hours after-school childcare each day. Expanding the scope of the scheme would have a financial cost which would have to be considered in the context of the budgetary process.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 76 answered with Question No. 54.

Social Welfare Benefits Waiting Times

77. Deputy Bobby Aylward asked the Minister for Social Protection the average waiting time for decisions on carer's allowance and domiciliary care allowance applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25765/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Carer's Allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment, made to persons who are providing full-time care and attention to a person who has a disability such that they require that level of care.

This means that the care recipient requires from another person continual supervision and frequent assistance throughout the day in connection with normal bodily functions or continual supervision in order to avoid being a danger to him/herself and is likely to require such full-time care for at least 12 months.

Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA) is a monthly payment to the parent/guardian of a child, aged under 16 with a disability so severe that the child requires care and attention and/or supervision substantially in excess of another child of the same age. This care and attention must be provided to allow the child to deal with the activities of daily living, and s/he must be likely to require this level of care and attention for at least 12 months.

My Department is committed to providing a quality service to all its customers. This includes ensuring that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible.

The current processing times for CA applications is 12 weeks and for DCA applications is 16 weeks. Both schemes have seen a considerable increase in applications in recent years. Applications for CA in 2016 were 20% higher than in 2015, while applications for DCA were 16% higher than in 2015. These increases, together with the need to introduce new revised decision making processes in early 2014, to demonstrate compliance with a High Court decision, have impacted on the volumes of applications processed within the set target.

Reducing these waiting times is a priority for my Department and we are working hard to make this happen. As part of its programme of service delivery modernisation, a range of initiatives aimed at streamlining the processing of claims, supported by modern technology,

have been implemented by my Department in recent years. Operational processes, procedures and the organisation of work are continually reviewed to ensure that processing capability is maximised.

In addition, staffing needs are regularly reviewed, having regard to workloads and the competing demands arising, to ensure that the best use is made of all available resources. Where additional staffing is deployed to a scheme, there is a time-lag involved while those staff are trained and build up expertise. My Department has seen a significant reduction in average CA processing times from 22 weeks at the end of May 2016 to 12 weeks at the end of April 2017 and expects the processing times for both schemes to reduce further over the next few months, as recently assigned staff get up to speed with the work involved in claim processing.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 78 answered with Question No. 52.

Question No. 79 answered with Question No. 31.

Social Welfare Benefits Waiting Times

80. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason for the increase in processing times for payments in his Department, including maternity benefit, carer's allowance, illness benefit, invalidity pension, occupational injuries benefit and domiciliary care allowance; his plans to improve performance in this area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25763/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department is committed to ensuring that claims are processed as expeditiously as possible. Each scheme area is continuously monitored and reviewed to ensure customers are responded to and claims are processed as quickly as possible. However, the Department has experienced some difficulty in recent times with the maternity benefit scheme, where it has not been possible to process all claims in advance of their maternity leave commencement date. Corrective actions have been taken and good progress is being made, with the number of expectant mothers who are impacted reducing significantly week by week.

Schemes such as those referenced in the question that require medical and other supporting documentation can take some time to properly assess, particularly as the opinion of one of the department's medical assessor's is routinely required. Increasing numbers applying have also been a feature of these schemes in recent years. As an example, in the 4 year period from 2013 to 2016 the number of applications for domiciliary care allowance has increased by 54%, from under 5,000 to almost 7,500 per annum. In addition to the increased volumes, there has recently also been a significant increase in the complexity and length of time required to process applications.

Efforts continue across all schemes to improve processing times, with a noticeable improvement in processing times for carer's allowance over the last twelve months, the average time to award reducing from 22 weeks in May 2016 to 12 weeks in April 2017.

As part of its programme of service delivery modernisation, a range of initiatives aimed at streamlining the processing of claims, supported by modern technology, have been implemented by my Department in recent years. Operational processes, procedures and the organisation of work are continually reviewed to ensure that processing capability is maximised. Staffing levels are also kept under continuous review to ensure the best use of available resources.

Departmental Reports

81. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of the report into the effects of the cuts to jobseekers' payments on those aged under 26 years of age; when he expects the report to be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25764/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) is undertaking a piece of research at the moment which is examining the effectiveness of the reduced rates in encouraging young jobseekers to avail of education, training, employment programmes and opportunities. My Department has not commissioned the NUIM to undertake this research, rather, as part of an effort to encourage and promote research my Department has facilitated the NUIM access to the data from the Jobseeker's Longitudinal Database in order to undertake this research. Initial results of the research were published as a working paper in April 2017 and this is available on the NUIM website.

Under Pathways to Work 2016-2020, my Department is committed to review and report on the impact of the reduced payment rates for jobseekers aged 18 to 25. This review will be finalised this year, and will take account of the results of the NUIM research.

Should a young jobseeker on a reduced jobseeker's allowance payment participate on an education or training programme they receive a higher weekly payment of €160, which is increasing to €193 per week from September 2017. With effect from March 2017, rates of jobseeker's payments were increased for claimants of all ages as a result of measures I introduced in Budget 2017.

I am committed to ensuring my Department identifies effective measures to incentivise and support young people in finding and securing sustainable jobs. The best way to do this is through engagement processes and by incentivising them to avail of educational and training opportunities, thereby enhancing their employment prospects.

Departmental Reports

82. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection when the report on the contributory pension scheme will be ready; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26006/17]

99. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Social Protection when he plans to report on the pension inequality that has emerged post-changes to the way the State contributory pension is calculated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26040/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 82 and 99 together.

I understand that the Deputies' questions relate to a comment I made in the course of the recent Social Welfare Bill 2016, when I announced that the issue of homemaker periods would be considered in the context of the Total Contributions Approach (TCA) reform that is being planned, and would feature in the consultation document produced as part of that process. The aim is to implement the TCA, to replace the current yearly average approach, with effect from January 2020, subject to the required legislative and technical changes.

I have stated that I expect a paper regarding the TCA to be available later this year, following receipt of data from the independent actuarial review of the Social Insurance Fund, which will be used to cost options in this reform. This data is expected in the coming months. Fol-

lowing its receipt that paper will be prepared, outlining and costing various options, including, as promised, options regarding homemaker periods.

It should be noted that there are several payments that are made to people over 66 by my Department, and the average personal payments made by my Department to men and women of this age are close to parity, with a differential of just 2%. This is reflected in CSO figures which show that women over 65 are 0.3% more likely to be at risk of poverty than their male counterparts (10.8% compared to 10.5%), and men over 65 are 0.3% more likely than women of that age to be in consistent poverty (2.9% compared to 2.6%). Most people will understand that such small differentials are statistically insignificant, and when it comes to the main domestic social indicators of poverty, men and women over 65 are at parity. It might also be noted that both of these indicators show that men and women over 65 are far less likely to be in poverty than working age people, who are the ones funding pensions on a pay as you go basis, as 16.9% of the general population are at risk of poverty, and 8.7% are in consistent poverty.

Similarly, EU figures show that Ireland has significantly smaller gender pension gaps and gender poverty gaps for over 65s than is the norm among our EU neighbours, even though some of those have longer periods of higher female participation in the labour market. In Ireland, unlike other countries, the State pension benefits received by a very high paid worker with significant PRSI deductions are identical to those of a part-time worker on the minimum wage in otherwise similar circumstances. It is not the case, as is sometimes suggested, that people with 20 or so years of contributions can expect a full contributory pension, and in most countries, even those with significant homemakers schemes, such a record will generally result in a significantly lower pension than they would be paid had they not had such gaps in their records. A challenge with the Total Contributions Approach, therefore, will be to ensure that the outcomes for women under the new scheme are at least as good as has been achieved to date.

In the meantime, where somebody does not qualify for a full rate contributory pension, they will generally qualify for an alternative payment, unless they have significant additional means. If their spouse has a contributory pension, they may qualify for an increase for a qualified adult amounting up to up to 90% of a full rate pension, which is based on their own means and is paid directly to them. Alternatively, they may qualify for a means-tested non-contributory State pension which amounts up to 95% of the maximum contributory rate, based on a household means test.

Most pensioners would satisfy the means tests for these two payments, and the very large majority of people paid them receive the maximum rate. Those alternatively in receipt of SPC payments at a lower rate, therefore, are among the better off pensioners who have significant additional means, over and above state supports.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

Question No. 83 answered with Question No. 54.

Question No. 84 answered with Question No. 65.

Pensions Reform

85. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when he proposes to publish his plans and costings for a universal pension for all persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25715/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I have made pension reform a

priority for my term as Minister for Social Protection. To this end I can confirm my intention to publish and start implementing an Action Plan for the reform of pensions over the coming months.

The rate of supplementary pension coverage in Ireland is estimated at 35% of the working population when the private sector is considered in isolation. If measures are not taken to address this low rate of coverage, many future retirees will experience unwanted reductions in their living standards when they reach retirement.

To deal with this situation, as well as a range of other reform measures, this Action Plan will set out proposals for a transition from the current and purely voluntary supplementary pension system to one which will automatically enrol eligible employees into a quality assured retirement savings system. This reform, where the saver will maintain the freedom of choice to opt-out, will encourage long term saving and asset accumulation amongst those who may otherwise suffer a reduction in living standards at retirement and will increase the wellbeing, financial security, and independence of future retirees.

Following the publication of this Action Plan and in order to guide future Government decisions, the detailed evidence building and consultation required to deliver automatic enrolment will be undertaken over an initial project planning phase. This work is needed to inform fundamental choices regarding the preferred operational structure and organisational governance for the new system as well as design elements such as the required contributions, financial incentives and target membership. Correctly positioning/designing each of these will be critical to the success of any system. Decisions on each of these matters will be required to determine costings for the system.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

State Pension (Contributory)

86. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to amend the legislation and regulations for eligibility for the State (contributory) pension (details supplied); if his attention has been drawn to the fact that many persons have been denied full rate of payment due to this method of calculation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25758/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): There are two State pensions related to reaching state pension age. Firstly, the State pension (non-contributory) is a means tested pension and is funded by general taxation. Secondly, the State pension (contributory) is not means tested and is paid from the Social Insurance Fund.

In Ireland, as in other countries, the State contributory pension is primarily aimed at people with sustained contributions towards the Social Insurance Fund which finances it, on a pay as you go basis, and rewards such contributions with greater entitlements and coverage for a range of benefits, including contributory pension entitlements. It is important to ensure that those qualifying for a contributory pension have made a sustained contribution to the Social Insurance Fund over their working lives. To ensure that the individual can maximise their entitlement to a State pension (contributory), all contributions paid or credited over their working life from when they first enter insurable employment until pension age are taken into account when assessing their entitlement and the level of that entitlement.

The home-makers scheme makes qualification for a higher rate of State pension (contributory) easier for those who take time out of the workforce for caring duties. The scheme, which

was introduced in and took effect for periods from 1994, allows up to 20 years spent caring for children under 12 years of age (or caring for incapacitated people over that age) to be disregarded in the calculation of the pensioners yearly average. This may have the effect of increasing the yearly average of the pensioner, which is used to set the rate of their pension, and may in turn qualify them for a higher rate of payment. The disregard does not involve the award of credits, and entitlements are still subject to the standard qualifying conditions for State pension contributory also being satisfied, including a minimum of 520 paid contributions being paid before reaching pension age.

This scheme was not introduced retrospectively. My Department has estimated that the annual cost of extending the Homemakers scheme to allow people to avail of the full 20 years currently allowed under the scheme, encompassing periods prior to 1994, could cost some €290m in 2017, and this figure would rise at a faster rate than the rate of the overall cost of State pensions. This is a very significant cost, and the main beneficiaries would be people who already have significant household means, and who do not therefore qualify for an alternative means-tested payment.

Where someone does not qualify for a full rate contributory pension, they may qualify for an alternative payment. If their spouse has a contributory pension, they may qualify for an Increase for a Qualified Adult amounting up to 90% of a full rate pension. Alternatively, they may qualify for a State pension (non-contributory), which amounts up to 95% of the maximum contributory rate.

For example, a person with a yearly average of 20 contributions paid or credited per year may qualify for a reduced rate SPC of €202.80. However, they can instead be paid a higher amount through the non-contributory pension, unless their means are over €52.50 per week (or €105 for a married couple), at a minimum payment rate of €204.50 (maximum rate is €227), which would bring their total personal means (including their pension) to over €257 per week. Their household means test ignores their spouse's state pension, the capital value of their home, and has generous income and capital asset disregards, where applicable. This minimum of €257 doesn't include rent allowance, household benefits or fuel allowance. It is also higher than the €238.30 received by a person solely dependent upon a maximum rate State pension (contributory), who would receive no benefit from any change to the method of calculation of contributory pension entitlements, and they would experience a loss if such a change was financed by reducing the core rate of the State pension, or by moderating increases in the future.

The National Pensions Framework (2010) proposed that a "Total Contributions Approach" (TCA) should replace the yearly average approach, for new pensioners from 2020. The aim of this approach is to make the rate of contributory pension more closely match contributions made by a person. Officials of my Department are currently working on the detailed development of the TCA with a view to making proposals for consideration later in the year. This is a very significant reform with considerable legal, administrative, and technical elements in its implementation. An important element in the final design of the scheme will be the position of people who have gaps in their contribution records for various reasons, and this factor is being considered very carefully in developing this reform.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Disability Allowance

87. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection further to Parliamentary Question No. 195 of 3 May 2017, his views on whether it would be more beneficial to

categorise various groupings of persons on disability allowance by type of disability or severity of disability in order that groups that work with persons with particular disabilities can plan resources on a needs-based approach; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25902/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Disability allowance (DA) is a payment for persons with a specified disability who are over 16 and under 66. As a result of that disability, which must be expected to last at least a year, they must be deemed to be substantially restricted in obtaining employment otherwise suitable to their age, qualifications and experience. Applicants must also satisfy a means test and be habitually resident in the State.

In its assessment of a person's medical suitability for DA, the Department does not dispute the diagnosis(es) of an applicant's doctor(s). Rather, it considers the severity and expected duration of the condition(s) and the resultant impact on a person's capacity to work, and assesses to what extent these match with the statutory conditionality of the DA scheme. It would not be appropriate to have a system of social protection where there is a specific benefit for a specific medical condition.

My Department keeps the data it collects under review to see how it might best serve the development of services and will consider the Deputy's suggestion in the context of our ongoing consultation with disability stakeholders.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Garda Vetting of Personnel

88. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to introduce a centralised Garda vetting system for community employment schemes similar to that operated by an organisation (details supplied) to address the additional cost this is imposing on community employment schemes. [25840/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): It is the responsibility of the Community Employment (CE) Sponsor to ensure that all CE participants working or training with children and/or vulnerable adults go through the Garda vetting process. Garda vetting of CE participants is primarily done through Volunteer Ireland.

The cost of Garda vetting can be recouped from the materials grant provided by my Department to CE Sponsors. I have no plans to introduce a centralised Garda vetting system for CE schemes.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Question No. 89 answered with Question No. 64.

State Pension (Contributory) Eligibility

90. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to implement changes to the State (contributory) pension criteria to ensure that persons that had a break in their insurance contribution records while in receipt of farm assist due to periods of low farm income are not deprived of the full State contributory pension; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25759/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The farm assist scheme was in-

troduced in 1999 to provide income support for low income farmers. It replaced the former smallholders' unemployment assistance payment. In line with the then existing arrangements for unemployment assistance (including smallholders) and pre-retirement allowance, the income of farm assist recipients was exempt from class S PRSI for self-employed workers.

Recipients of farm assist who had previously paid Class S social insurance had the option of paying voluntary contributions to maintain their social insurance record, provided they satisfied the qualifying conditions. Since 1 January 2007, the exemption from class S PRSI has been removed and those receiving jobseeker's allowance and farm assist are subject to Class S PRSI as self-employed contributors on their self-employed income, provided their annual income is €5,000 or more.

I have no plans to amend legislation regarding the State pension (contributory), to award a maximum rate payment to pensioners who had such a period during 1999-2006 when they were exempt from PRSI.

However, a person aged over 66 with limited PRSI contributions over the course of their life may claim a State pension (non-contributory) if they have an income need, and this entitlement is not based on payment of social insurance contributions. The maximum weekly rate is €227, i.e., over 95% of the maximum contributory pension rate. While it is means-tested, there are very significant disregards which are to the benefit of claimants, and over 70% of such pensioners are paid at the full rate.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Job Creation

91. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the steps he is taking to provide jobs for unemployed young persons, which totalled 12.9% in April 2017, almost double the youth unemployment rate in Germany. [23031/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Government policy to reduce unemployment is twofold. First, through policies set out in the Action Plan for Jobs, to create an environment in which business can succeed and create jobs; and second, through Pathways to Work to ensure that as many of these new jobs and other vacancies that arise in our economy are filled by people taken from the Live Register, including young unemployed people.

To date, these policies have been effective in reducing youth unemployment. The Irish youth unemployment rate has fallen from a peak of 31.0% in Q2 2012 to 13.7% in Q1 2017, bringing this rate from well above the EU average in 2012 to well below the EU average of 17.3% at the latter date (latest EUROSTAT data available). This places Ireland as one of the best performing Member States in terms of reducing its youth unemployment rate. Irish youth unemployment has also been converging rapidly on Germany's youth unemployment rate, which was about 8% in 2012 and is now just under 7%.

These trends indicate that together with improvements in the labour market and economic recovery, our approach to youth employment, which focuses in the first instance on enhancing processes and policies for assisting young unemployed people to find and secure sustainable jobs, has been relatively successful.

I am confident these measures, and continuing economic recovery, will support further reductions in youth unemployment and add to the substantial improvements that have already been seen over the last few years.

Question No. 92 answered with Question No. 63.

Question No. 93 answered with Question No. 52.

Question No. 94 answered with Question No. 41.

Question No. 95 answered with Question No. 31.

Labour Activation Programmes

96. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he is considering providing replacement schemes for JobBridge and Gateway; if so, the detail of such schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25708/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The JobBridge scheme was introduced in July 2011 in response to the sharp and dramatic increase in unemployment. A robust external evaluation of the scheme, conducted by Indecon Economic Consultants in 2016, found that it is one of the most effective labour market programmes – increasing participants' employment outcomes by 32%. It also found that while participants rated the scheme positively on 18 out of 20 aspects measured, most were dissatisfied with the level of payment and a sizable minority rated the scheme negatively on some aspects, for example the quality of training offered. Based on the findings, and taking account of the improvement in labour market conditions, Indecon recommended that JobBridge be discontinued in its current form and replaced with a new scheme. A copy of the full evaluation can be found on my Department's website (<http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/JobBridge-Evaluation.aspx>).

The Labour Market Council welcomed the report and noted the positive employment impact of the scheme. A majority of the Council similarly recommended that JobBridge be replaced. Having considered the evidence and the suggestions put forward by Indecon and the Labour Market Council, I announced the closure of JobBridge to new applications from 27 October 2016 and my intention to replace it later this year with a new work experience programme better suited to the much-improved labour market and that addresses criticisms of the scheme.

I am very conscious that any new scheme would need the support, trust and confidence of employers, jobseekers and the public. That is why I instructed my officials to consult with key stakeholders before making a final decision on any potential replacement scheme. That process has recently concluded and I will make an announcement after I have a chance to consider the feedback.

The Gateway scheme is a work placement scheme designed to provide short-term work opportunities for unemployed people in Local Authorities. As the economic recovery takes hold and the overall level of unemployment continues to fall, the need to adapt employment programmes, such as Gateway to the changing circumstances, opportunities and the needs of jobseekers has become more apparent and urgent. This is necessary to ensure that the number and nature of schemes, as well as the conditions governing participation on these schemes, continues to be appropriate. It is recognised by Government that these activation schemes are positive initiatives that enable the long-term unemployed to make a contribution to their communities whilst up-skilling themselves for prospective future employment. It is also recognised that long-term unemployment and joblessness remain critical issues. The removal of barriers to employment for those furthest from the labour market continues to be a challenge, even in periods of economic growth. In advance of any possible changes, my Department will consult with key stakeholders.

Question No. 97 answered with Question No. 45.

Question No. 98 answered with Question No. 55.

Question No. 99 answered with Question No. 82.

Brexit Documents

100. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide an update on proposals to be published by his Department to address the economic and trade implications of Brexit. [25625/17]

The Taoiseach: On 29 April, the European Council adopted Guidelines establishing the framework for negotiations with the UK on its exit from the EU. On 22 May, the Council of Ministers of 27 adopted a decision authorising the beginning of the negotiations, which are expected to start soon after the UK general election.

The negotiating directives under which the talks will be conducted reflect Ireland's unique concerns - support and protect the achievements, benefits and commitments of the peace process; avoid a hard border; and protect the Common Travel Area.

Now that the terms on which the negotiations are to be conducted have been established, the Government has stated its intention to intensify its focus on the economic implications of Brexit, including on domestic policy measures to reinforce the competitiveness of the Irish economy; to protect it from potential negative impacts of Brexit; and to pursue all possible opportunities that might arise.

Work is underway on a paper, which will be published in due course and which will draw on the extensive work already being undertaken across Departments, including sectoral analyses, and will reflect the core economic themes of my speech to the Institute of International and European Affairs of 15 February, including:

- sustainable fiscal policies to ensure capacity to absorb and respond to economic shocks, not least from Brexit;
- policies to make Irish enterprise more diverse and resilient, to diversify trade and investment patterns, and to strengthen competitiveness;
- prioritising policy measures and dedicating resources to protect jobs and businesses in the sectors and regions most affected by Brexit;
- realising economic opportunities arising from Brexit, and help businesses adjust to any new logistical or trade barriers arising;
- making a strong case at EU level that Ireland will require support that recognises where Brexit represents a serious disturbance to the Irish economy.

Policy decisions in support of these objectives will be reflected in, inter alia, the annual Budgetary process; the forthcoming National Planning Framework 2040; the new 10-year National Capital Plan; the review of Enterprise 2025; and sectoral policies and investment decisions in areas such as agriculture, enterprise, transport, communications and energy.

In taking this important work forward, the Government will continue to engage with stakeholders, including through the All Island Civic Dialogue process.

Departmental Strategy Statements

101. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach the way in which his Department is delivering on its own strategy statement on planning for the future particularly on delivery of key infrastructure. [25947/17]

The Taoiseach: My Department's Strategy Statement sets out the key objectives for the Department for the period 2016 to 2019.

The Strategy Statement is aligned to the Government's key priorities and policies, and sets out six strategic priorities, including Planning for the Future.

The Strategy Statement recognises the role of my Department in ensuring that policies are developed to support the delivery of key infrastructure, in particular through the work of the Cabinet Committee on Infrastructure, Environment and Climate Action. My Department also contributes to this objective through the preparation of the annual National Risk Assessment and the work of the National Economic and Social Council. My Department also monitors and reports on delivery across all Departments of commitments in the Programme for a Partnership Government.

My Department publishes an Annual Report on progress towards all the objectives in its Strategy Statement, and the Annual Report for 2016 will be published very shortly.

Brexit Negotiations

102. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the engagements between officials in his Department and sherpas in the governments of other EU member states on Brexit. [25624/17]

The Taoiseach: The Second Secretary General in the Department of the Taoiseach acts as Ireland's Sherpa and, in this capacity, meets and engages regularly with his EU counterparts.

Since the triggering of Article 50 on 29 March, there have been two formal Sherpa meetings under the Article 50 format - one on 11 April, and another on 24 April. Ireland participated fully in both of these. The discussions focused on the EU negotiating guidelines, which were subsequently agreed by the European Council on 29 April.

Brexit Negotiations

103. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if his officials have commenced work on reviewing the necessity of the technical and legal disentanglements that will be required between north and south of the island in the context of the Brexit negotiations; and the other Departments that are involved. [25945/17]

The Taoiseach: Northern Ireland remains a key priority for the Irish Government.

The interests of the island as a whole and protecting the gains of the peace process remain a priority for the Government in the upcoming Brexit negotiations, as we have stated clearly all along.

There has been on going engagement between North and South on Brexit however this has been difficult in the absence of a functioning Northern Ireland Executive. It is critically impor-

tant to see devolved Government restored and working effectively in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland, in particular in the context of Brexit.

There is ongoing analysis of all Brexit related issues across Government Departments on the full range of impacts including potential impacts on North/South including technical & legal aspects. This work is being co-ordinated through the Cabinet Committee on Brexit and the Interdepartmental Group on Brexit.

The EU guidelines for the negotiations include very strong acknowledgement of our unique circumstances and the need to protect the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement. They provide that existing bilateral agreements and arrangements between the United Kingdom and Ireland, which are compatible with EU law, should be recognised.

The Irish Government wishes to see the closest possible relationship between the EU and the UK as an outcome of the negotiations and is fully committed to membership of the EU while maintaining close bilateral relations with the UK and protecting all parts of the Good Friday Agreement, including North/South Co-operation.

Ireland is not leaving the EU and remains fully committed to our membership of the EU. We will be very much part of the EU team in negotiations ahead. The negotiations on withdrawal of UK from the EU have not yet started therefore we cannot pre-empt the outcome at this stage.

Bankruptcy Data

104. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality the number of persons each year since 2012 petitioned into bankruptcy by a fund on debt purchased by the fund from a bank; the number of these cases in which assets were surrendered prior to the bankruptcy and residual debt remained; the number of these cases in which the family home was lost as a result of the bankruptcy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26106/17]

Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I am advised by the Insolvency Service of Ireland that since 2012, one person was petitioned into bankruptcy by a debt purchasing company. The debtor was adjudicated bankrupt in December 2016, and is still resident in the family home.

Office for Internet Safety

105. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality the number of persons that work in the Office for Internet Safety; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26170/17]

Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The Office for Internet Safety (OIS) is responsible for developing strategic actions to promote the highest possible levels of internet safety, particularly in relation to combatting child pornography. The OIS currently has two members of staff assigned to it who in turn are working alongside officials working in other divisions of my Department which have a specific remit in dealing with cyber-related policy. The OIS coordinates the EU Safer Internet Programme for Ireland and channel the EU funding, which runs from January 2017 to June 2019, to four partner bodies. The bodies funded are:

- PDST – Professional Development Service for Teachers Technology in Education (a part

of the Department of Education and Skills),

- Childline which is operated by the ISPCC,
- the National Parents Council (Primary) which operates a helpline for parents and
- Hotline.ie which is operated by the Internet Service Providers Association of Ireland.

A dedicated website www.internetsafety.ie is supported by the Office and provides information and links to other resources on internet safety. In addition, it partners with experts to develop and publish a series of information booklets on internet safety which are made available on the website and also in hard copy.

The OIS has an oversight role in the operation of Hotline.ie and the Garda blocking initiative. Hotline.ie is the confidential service for reporting illegal content in the internet in Ireland and it liaises closely with An Garda Síochána (AGS) in carrying out its functions. In November 2014, An Garda Síochána launched an initiative on the blocking of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) on the internet in Ireland. AGS signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with a large internet provider company under which the company agreed to block access to CSAM as per a list supplied by AGS. AGS continues to engage with other companies with a view to establishing further MOUs.

In September 2016, the Law Reform Commission published its report on ‘Harmful Communications and Digital Safety’. While noting the positive benefits to society of the interconnected digital world in which we live, the report also noted the negative aspects and the emerging trend to engage in online communications that cause significant harm to others. In December 2016, the Government gave its approval for the drafting of a General Scheme of a Bill which would provide for new and amended criminal offences along the lines set out in the report. The Bill will address the criminal law aspects of the Law Reform Commission’s report. The Commission has proposed extending some existing offences and creating some new criminal offences. Drafting to prepare the General Scheme is ongoing in my Department.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Internet Content Governance Advisory Group (ICGAG), established by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, made a series of recommendations in relation to the OIS including the transfer of some of its functions to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. In order to oversee the implementation of the various recommendations in the Report, an interdepartmental implementation group was established under the chairmanship of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and work is ongoing in this regard. The group includes representatives from the Departments of Communications Climate Action and Environment, Children and Youth Affairs, Education and Skills, Health and my own Department.

Coroners Service

106. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality her views on the retirement age of coroners (details supplied) and the time persons have to wait for an inquest; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26211/17]

Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The retirement age for coroners is set down in section 11 of the Coroners Act 1962 as seventy years of age. This provision was repeated in the Coroners Bill 2007. I have no plans to change the age of retirement.

I can inform the Deputy that the timeframe between the death of a person and the holding of any necessary inquest is dependent on a number of factors, including the receipt by the Coroner of the results of the post-mortem, the receipt by the Coroner of results of any tests carried out as part of the post-mortem process and the question of whether or not a criminal prosecution is being considered. In these circumstances it is not possible to give an average timeframe.

The Deputy will appreciate that Coroners exercise quasi-judicial functions, in respect of which they are independent and it would, therefore, be improper for me to comment on the exercise of these functions.

International Terrorism

107. Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality the steps being taken to increase security in the wake of the terrorist attack in Manchester; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26087/17]

108. Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality the steps being taken to increase security and defence in the wake of the terrorist attack in Manchester; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26088/17]

Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I propose to take Questions Nos. 107 and 108 together.

The recent bomb attack in Manchester is another tragic reminder that no state can be considered immune from the threat from international terrorism. The current assessment of the threat here is that while a terrorist attack here is possible, it is unlikely and there is no specific information in relation to any threat to Ireland from international terrorism.

The level of threat is kept under constant review by the Garda Authorities. The House will understand the detail of security arrangements that are in place should not be disclosed. An Garda Síochána has considerable operational capacities in countering terrorism and in responding to critical incidents. There is, in particular, a highly-trained and well-equipped special intervention capability in the Emergency Response Unit that is supported by the regional Armed Support Units and the range of other resources across the Garda organisation. The considerable skills and resources of the Defence Forces are also available in support to the civil power when and where needed.

They are engaged in intensive, ongoing work aimed at preventing any attack taking place here. In this regard they work closely with the Defence Forces. Detailed preparations have also been made in the event of an attack. Other agencies also have plans in place to deal with the outcome of major incidents. Of its nature, much of this work cannot be disclosed publicly, but the Deputy should be assured that it goes on relentlessly.

The authorities here will continue to work closely with their EU and other international counterparts in responding to the shared threat to national and international security. The Government is committed to providing An Garda Síochána with the necessary resources to enhance their connectivity to a range of EU and other international resources and a significant programme of work is ongoing in this regard supported by dedicated funding. This includes connecting to the Schengen Information System, developing the processing of travel-related data and mechanisms for the exchange of criminal fingerprint and DNA data.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Taoiseach chaired a meeting on 25 May to review the State's arrangements and level of preparedness in the event of a major terrorist attack here.

Taoiseach and I as well as a number of other Ministers with relevant responsibilities attended, along with the Garda Commissioner, the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces and senior officials. The meeting was briefed on the current threat assessment by the security authorities.

It is also important to note that overall national emergency management arrangements are in place, involving all the different agencies of the State. Co-ordinated by the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning and the Office of Emergency Planning, all the various agencies and bodies continue to work closely together in supporting co-ordinated responses to any incident that might arise.

Of equal importance is the ongoing work to counter radicalisation. It is important to ensure that in the context of attacks such as that in Manchester, our Muslim community is not unfairly stigmatised. The Gardaí have developed a strong model of community-level interaction with minority communities in the State, including our Muslim community, and will maintain that interaction in order to serve those communities and to ensure that vulnerable individuals within those communities can be supported appropriately.

Courts Service Data

109. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality the number of court cases per year in which it has been shown that a person has made a fraudulent claim in each of the years 2014 to 2016, and to date in 2017; the number of times per year the judge has referred the person or persons to the Director of Public Prosecutions as specified in the Civil Liability and Courts Act 2004; the number of prosecutions made per year by the DPP as a result of the referral from the judge; the number of successful prosecutions made per year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26104/17]

Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): As the Deputy is aware, under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions, which include the provision of information on the courts system.

However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have had enquiries made and the Courts Service has informed me that statistics are not compiled in such a way as to provide the information requested by the Deputy. I intend to request the Courts Service to examine the requirements, including system development and resource issues, needed to enable the compiling of such statistics going forward.

Garda Data

110. **Deputy Shane Cassells** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality the number of Garda stations and the number of gardaí in each in County Meath as of 30 April 2016. [26122/17]

Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): As the Deputy will appreciate, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the distribution of resources, including personnel, among the various Garda Divisions and I, as Minister, have no direct role in the matter. Garda management keeps this distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities so as to ensure that the optimum use is made of these resources.

I have been advised by the Commissioner that as of the 31 March 2017 there were 288 Garda with 18 Garda Reserves and 27 civilians attached to the Meath Division. When appropriate, the work of local Gardaí is supported by a number of Garda national units such as the National Bureau of Criminal Investigation, the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau and the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau.

This Government is committed to ensuring a strong and visible police presence throughout the country in order to maintain and strengthen community engagement, provide reassurance to citizens and deter crime. To make this a reality for all, the Government has in place a plan to achieve an overall Garda workforce of 21,000 personnel by 2021 comprising 15,000 Garda members, 2,000 Reserve members and 4,000 civilians. In 2017, funding has been provided for the recruitment of 800 Garda recruits and up to 500 civilians to support the wide ranging reform plan in train in An Garda Síochána. Funding has also been provided for the recruitment of 300 Garda Reserves.

This plan is progressing apace. I am informed by the Commissioner, since the reopening of the Garda College in September 2014, that just under 1,000 recruits have attested as members of An Garda Síochána and have been assigned to mainstream duties nationwide 31 of whom were assigned to the Meath Division. I am also informed that another 600 trainee Garda are scheduled to attest this year which will see Garda numbers, taking account of projected retirements, increase to around the 13,500 mark by year end - an increase of 500 since the end of 2016.

This focus on investment in personnel is critical. The moratorium on recruitment introduced in 2010 resulted in a significant reduction in the strength of An Garda Síochána. We are now rebuilding the organisation and providing the Commissioner with the resources she needs to allow her to deploy increasing numbers of Gardaí including Community Gardaí across every Garda Division including the Meath Division in the coming years. To ensure a continuous pipeline of candidates a new recruitment drive was launched by the Commissioner earlier this month with a closing date of 1 June. The competition is being undertaken by the Public Appointment Service on behalf of the Commissioner and applications should be made to www.publicjobs.ie.

This investment in personnel is complemented by substantial investment in resources across the board for An Garda Síochána. The Deputy will be aware of the significant resources that have been made available to An Garda Síochána under the Government's Capital Plan 2016 - 2021. In particular, some €205 million in additional funding for Garda ICT and €46 million for new Garda vehicles has been allocated over the lifetime of the plan. This investment will facilitate the provision of more effective policing services and I have no doubt that these new resources now coming on stream will see an increase in Garda visibility in our communities.

For the Deputy's information, I have set out the strength of the Meath Division by Garda Station as of 31 March 2017, the latest date for which figures are currently available.

Meath Division Strength 31 March 2017

DISTRICT	STATION	TOTAL
ASHBOURNE	ASHBOURNE	48
	DULEEK	5
	DUNBOYNE	16
	DUNSHAUGHLIN	17
	LAYTOWN	21
	TOTAL:	107

DISTRICT	STATION	TOTAL
KELLS	BAILE ÁTHA BUÍ	5
	KELLS	37
	OLDCASTLE	3
	TOTAL:	45
NAVAN	NAVAN	85
	NOBBER	3
	SLANE	4
	TOTAL:	92
TRIM	BALLIVOR	2
	ENFIELD	3
	LONGWOOD	2
	SUMMERHILL	2
	TRIM	35
	TOTAL:	44
MEATH TOTAL:	16 STATIONS	288

Immigration Status

111. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality when a decision on an application for a permission to remain in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork will be issued; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26127/17]

Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I am advised by the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) of my Department that an application was received at the end of January 2017, from the person mentioned by the Deputy, for permission to remain in the State as the spouse of an Irish National and that the application is being processed. All applications are dealt with in strict chronological order and the processing of application can take a number of months.

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

Missing Children

112. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality the reason a company (details supplied) has not being granted the approval to issue an online social media amber text alert here in the event of a child or youth going missing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26171/17]

Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I have requested a report from the Garda authorities in relation to the matter raised and I will contact the Deputy directly on receipt of this report

Independent Review Mechanism

113. **Deputy John Brassil** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality when her attention was drawn to a matter (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26212/17]

114. **Deputy John Brassil** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality if she will address a matter (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26213/17]

115. **Deputy John Brassil** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality if she will address a matter (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26214/17]

Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I propose to take Questions Nos. 113 to 115, inclusive, together.

The incident involving the person to whom the Deputy refers in his question dates back to 1989. It has been the subject of correspondence with successive Ministers for Justice going back over a considerable period of time, including legal correspondence. It has also been the subject of many Questions over that period.

I am informed by the Garda Authorities that the incident in question was the subject of a thorough investigation at the time. The Deputy will appreciate, of course, that any decisions in respect of prosecutions are a matter solely for the Director of Public Prosecutions, who acts independently in accordance with the law.

Complaints were made previously by the person to whom the Deputy refers to the Garda Síochána Complaints Board which investigated the matters raised and found no evidence of an offence or breach of discipline on the part of the Garda members concerned.

This case was also among those reviewed as part of the Independent Review Mechanism established by the Government in May 2014 to consider certain complaints of Garda misconduct referred to the Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice and Equality. An independent panel consisting of two senior counsel and five junior counsel was established for that purpose. To ensure that the independence of the review process was preserved, I appointed a retired High Court Judge, Mr. Justice Roderick Murphy, to oversee the preparation of summaries and recommendations in the notification letters of the outcome of the process. His role was to independently vouch for the fact that the summaries of conclusions and the reasoning behind them were a fair reflection of the advice which has been made available to my Department by the Panel.

It was open to the independent counsel of the Independent Review Mechanism to make any recommendation that they saw fit. Having examined this particular case the recommendation was that there was no further action to be taken by me. I understand that some matters which the Deputy raises were a part of that examination. The independent counsel's recommendation was accepted and the reasons for this conclusion were communicated to the person referred to by the Deputy in November 2015.

VAT Registration

116. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the policy and practical issues that would arise if the VAT registration threshold was to be increased; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26094/17]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): VAT is governed by the EU VAT Directive (Council Directive 2006/112/EC), with which Irish VAT law must comply. The thresholds for Ireland date from accession into the EU and the Directive only provides for the raising of

those thresholds by Member States to maintain their value in real terms. That is, they may only be increased in line with inflation. The Irish VAT thresholds were increased to their current values on 1 May 2008. As Central Statistics Office figures show the consumer price index is below the level it reached in 2008, it is not possible to increase the thresholds.

I would point out that Ireland's VAT registration threshold for small enterprises supplying services is the eighth highest in the EU while the goods threshold is the third highest.

While the registration thresholds are designed to reduce the administrative burden on businesses and Revenue, registration thresholds are not intended as a means of keeping small businesses permanently outside the VAT system. Therefore in setting registration threshold levels, the objective is to strike an appropriate balance between the desirability of reducing the administrative burden on small businesses and the need to avoid undermining tax compliance or causing competitive distortions relative to registered firms.

Revenue Commissioners Data

117. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the number of times since 2012 the Revenue Commissioners was deemed to be an excludable creditor in a personal insolvency arrangement or a debt settlement arrangement; the number of these cases per year in which the Revenue Commissioners exercised its right as excludable creditors to opt into the insolvency process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26105/17]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): Revenue's clear preference is always to engage positively with insolvent individuals who enter into Personal Insolvency or Debt Settlement arrangements and has to date agreed terms in five hundred cases since the Personal Insolvency Act was enacted.

However Revenue can only 'opt in' to the process where the Personal Insolvency Practitioner on behalf of the insolvent person provides a complete account of all debts and assets and also provides any clarifications that might subsequently be required. It is not possible for Revenue to 'opt in' where there is incomplete information or where the tax debt can not be fully quantified.

The most common difficulties that arise for Revenue in personal insolvency situations include outstanding tax returns, receiving information that clearly conflicts with Revenue's own data or where a Revenue audit or investigation has already started. It can also be the case that the proposals do not have the support of a sufficient number of creditors to make them financially viable for the insolvent person and that Revenue can offer a more suitable arrangement through its own debt support initiatives.

In situations where Revenue 'opts out' of a Personal Insolvency or Debt Settlement arrangement it continues to engage with the insolvent person and in the majority of cases agrees a mutually acceptable payment arrangement that takes due regard of the particular circumstances.

The following table sets out the total number of Personal Insolvency/Debt Settlement applications received by Revenue to date, including a breakdown of the 'opt in/opt out' decisions made:

Year	Total Cases Received	'Opt In' by Revenue	'Opt Out' by Revenue
2013	2	0	2
2014	110	70	40

Year	Total Cases Received	'Opt In' by Revenue	'Opt Out' by Revenue
2015	186	108	78
2016	355	197	158
2017 (to date)	218	125	93
TOTAL	871	500	371

Liquor Licence Data

118. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance the current cost of a wine, beer and spirit licence for retailers in the off-trade, publicans, on-trade and a special restaurants licence in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26262/17]

119. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance the number of liquor licences issued and the income received for retailers, off-licence, publicans, on-trade and the special restaurants licence in each of the years 2014, 2015 and 2016 in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26263/17]

120. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance the number of publican and on-trade licences issued in 2016 by category and based on the cost of the licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26264/17]

121. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance the average payment made by publicans holding an on-trade liquor licence in 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26265/17]

122. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance the average payment made by retailers in the off-trade holding beer, spirit and wine licences in 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26266/17]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 118 to 122, inclusive, together.

I am advised by Revenue that the average payment made by publicans holding an on-trade liquor licence in 2016 was €737 and that the average payment made by retailers in the off-trade holding beer, spirit and wine licences in 2016 was €1,265.

Table 1 sets out the current cost of a wine, beer and spirit licence for retailers in the off trade, publicans on trade and the special restaurant licence.

Table 1 – Excise Licence Cost

	New Licence Cost	Renewal Cost
Wine Retailer's Off Licence	€500	€500
Beer Retailer's Off Licence	€500	€500
Spirit Retailer's Off Licence	€500	€500
Special Restaurant Licence	€3,805	€500
Publican's Fixed Rate (specific licence category)	€500	€500
Publican's Turnover Based	€250	Based on Turnover*
*Annual Turnover	Cost	
Under €190,500	€250	
€190,500 to €380,999	€505	

	New Licence Cost	Renewal Cost
€381,000 to €634,999	€1,140	
€635,000 to €952,499	€1,775	
€952,500 to €1,269,999	€2,535	
€1,270,000 or more	€3,805	

Table 2 sets out the number of liquor licences issued and the fees received for retailers, off-licence, publicans on trade and the special restaurant licence in each of the years 2014, 2015 and 2016.

Table 2 - Licence Numbers and Receipts

	2014	2014	2015	2015	2016	2016
	Numbers Issued	Receipts€	Numbers Issued	Receipts€	Numbers Issued	Receipts€
Beer Off-Licence	1,788	894,000	1,796	897,500	1,954	976,000
Spirit Off-Licence	1,767	883,500	1,782	891,500	1,937	967,500
Wine Off-Licence	3,407	1,703,500	3,328	1,663,500	3,435	1,716,750
Cider Off-Licence	8	4,000	6	3,000	7	3,500
Publican Full	8,290	5,786,955	8,118	5,939,270	8,329	6,142,925
Publican Six-Day	8	2,000	9	2,505	7	2,005
Publican Six-Day and Early-closing	2	500	2	500	2	500
Special Restaurant Renewal	415	207,500	416	208,000	477	249,720
Special Restaurant (New Licences)	30	114,150	34	129,370	29	110,345

Table 3 and Table 4 set out the number of publican on trade licences issued in 2016 by category and based on the licence cost.

Table 3

Publican Licence costs	€250	€505	€1,140	€1,775	€2,535	€3,805
Turnover Band	€0 - €190,499	€190,500 - €380,999	€381,000 - €634,999	€635,000 - €952,499	€952,500 - €1,269,999	€1,270,000 or more
Publican's Licence (6-Day & early closing)	2	0	0	0	0	0
Publican's Licence (6-Day)	6	1	0	0	0	0
Publican's Licence (7-Day ordinary)	4020	1806	715	440	188	289
Publican's Licence (Ordinary) Hotel - (Public Bar)	24	11	11	4	3	6
Publican's Licence (Ordinary) Hotel - (Resident's Bar)	5	0	1	0	1	0

Publican Licence costs	€250	€505	€1,140	€1,775	€2,535	€3,805
Publican's Licence (Ordinary) Hotel - BF - (Public Bar)*	95	100	93	95	58	91
Publican's Licence (Ordinary) Hotel - BF - (Resident's Bar)*	49	8	5	3	0	1
Publican's Ordinary Railway Refreshment Rooms Licence**	1	1	1	1	0	2
Total	4202	1927	826	543	250	389

*BF refers to Failte Ireland Certification. This applies to all new Hotel Licences for both Residents and Public Bars where the first Licence granted was after 1960 or where an original Licence was revived in Court after 1960

**applies per Railway Car

Table 4

Fixed Cost Publican's licence	€500
Category	Number Issued
Aerodrome Licence	26
National Cultural Institutions Licence	4
National Sporting Arena Licence	7
Publican's Licence (ordinary) - Holiday Camp	1
Publican's Licence (ordinary) - Theatre	127
Publican's Licence (Ordinary) Greyhound Racetrack	15
Publican's Licence (ordinary) Horse Racecourse	21
Total	201

Question No. 119 answered with Question No. 118.

Question No. 120 answered with Question No. 118.

Question No. 121 answered with Question No. 118.

Question No. 122 answered with Question No. 118.

Liquor Licence Fees

123. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will bring the liquor licence fees for the off-trade in line with the on-trade which is graduated and based on annual turnover; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26267/17]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The issue of applying turnover-based licensing to the off trade was considered in TSG15/05 General Excise Duties Tax Strategy Group

paper in advance of Budget 2016, and is available on my Department's website: <http://www.finance.gov.ie/what-we-do/tax-policy/tax-strategy-group/tsg-2015/tsg-papers-budget-2016>.

In relation to the off-trade, a separate licence is required to sell spirits, wine, beer, cider or sweets for consumption off the premises. The duty for each licence is €500 and is charged on a flat rate basis. Therefore, the costs for a typical off-licence selling wine, spirits and beer is €1,500.

In relation to the on-trade, the licence is based on the 'annual turnover', which includes the provision of entertainment, sale of snack foods, beverages or meals for consumption on the premises and the sale of tobacco products. The average payment of on-trade licences in 2016 was €737. It should also be noted that over 75% of on-trade undertakings pay the two lowest rates of either €250 or €505.

Applying turnover based licensing for the off trade has been seen as a mechanism to level the playing field between on trade and off trade and to tackle the issue of below cost selling by increasing the charge on off licences. However, as you can see from the information above, the off trade licences are more expensive than the vast majority of the on trade licences being issued.

I will ask my officials to continue to monitor the situation but until I see compelling evidence of the benefits of applying a turnover base licence to the off trade, I have no plans to interfere with the current regime.

Special Educational Needs Staff

124. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason a school (details supplied) in County Kerry is losing a teaching post under the new special education teaching allocation; if this case will be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26076/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I wish to advise the Deputy that DES Circular 0013/2017 for primary schools and 0014/2017 for post primary schools were published on 7 March 2017.

These Circulars set out the details of the new model for allocating special education teachers to schools.

The revised allocation process replaces the generalised allocation process at primary and post primary school level for learning support and high incidence special educational needs, and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) allocation process which provided additional resource teaching supports to schools, to support pupils assessed as having Low Incidence disabilities.

The new Special Education Teaching allocation provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile.

Allocations based on the school profiles were issued to all schools on 7 March. Details of the special education teaching allocations have also been published on the NCSE website.

The aim of this new model is to deliver better outcomes for children with special educational needs. Substantial research, analysis, consultation with service users and stakeholders,

and piloting have gone in to the development of this model and all of the evidence points to the fact that this new system will deliver better outcomes for children.

No school, including the school to which the Deputy has referred, will lose supports as a result of the implementation of the new model. In addition, no school will receive an allocation, for the support of pupils with complex needs, less than the allocation they received to support such pupils during the 2016/17 school year.

An additional 900 teaching posts have been provided to support the introduction of this new allocation model. The provision of an additional 900 teaching posts is a very significant investment in the provision of additional teaching support for pupils with special educational needs in our schools. This is additional to an increase of 41% in the number of resource teachers allocated to schools annually by the NCSE since 2011.

The additional funding will provide additional supports to over 1200 schools who are identified as needing additional supports as a result of the new model. Supports for children with special educational needs is a key priority for this Government. The new funding will ensure that all schools receive a sufficient allocation of special education needs resources to provide additional teaching support to all pupils, including pupils who have yet to enrol in their school, who require such support.

In relation to the particular school referred to by the Deputy, this school had a Learning Support allocation of 40 hours for the 2016/17 school year, which combined with 33.15 resource teaching hours allocated to the school by the National Council for Special Education, gave a total allocation to the school of 73.15 additional teaching hours for the 2016/17 school year.

As the profiled allocation for the school did not indicate an increased allocation requirement for the school for 2017/18, the school has maintained its existing level of allocation.

The special education teaching allocation for this school for 2017/18 is 73.15 hours.

There has therefore been no reduction to the special education teaching allocation for this school.

Schools who wished to submit an appeal were asked to do so by March 31 2017.

The NCSE has confirmed that the school referred to in this question has not submitted an appeal.

Schools could appeal whether the data used to calculate their school profile was correct and complete and whether it was correctly applied in the calculation of their 2017/18 allocation.

The model will also allow for some additional provision for exceptional circumstances or where a school's enrolment levels increase very substantially prior to the next review of the model. The National Council for Special Education will support schools in managing their special education teaching allocations in the first instance. Only in very exceptional circumstances, where it can be demonstrated that the schools profile has changed very significantly since the allocation was made to the school, may an additional allocation of hours be made to the school.

Guidelines for schools on the organisation, deployment and use of their special education teachers to address the need of pupils with special educational needs have also now been published and are available on my Departments website.

The Guidelines will support schools to reflect on how they can review and manage their timetabling practices to ensure the timetable is sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of all pu-

pils in their school who have special needs. The Guidelines encourage schools to ensure they deploy their resources appropriately to meet the needs of all of the children in their school who require additional teaching support, including pupils with emerging needs, or new entrants.

Psychological Assessments

125. **Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of children a primary school can refer for a NEPS assessment in a given school year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26082/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Deputy will be aware that my Department's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provides educational psychology service to all primary and post primary schools through an assigned NEPS psychologist and in some cases receive assessment services through the Scheme for Commissioning Psychological Assessments (SCPA). Under this scheme schools can have a student assessment carried out by a member of the panel of private psychologists approved by NEPS, and NEPS will pay the psychologist the fees for this assessment directly.

In common with many other psychological services and best international practice, NEPS has adopted a consultative model of service. The focus is on empowering teachers to intervene effectively with pupils whose needs range from mild to severe and transient to enduring. Psychologists use a problem solving and solution focused consultative approach to maximise positive outcomes for these pupils. NEPS encourages schools to use a continuum based assessment and intervention process whereby each school takes responsibility for initial assessment, educational planning and remedial intervention for pupils with learning, emotional or behavioural difficulties. Teachers may consult their NEPS psychologist should they need to at this stage in the process. Only in the event of a failure to make reasonable progress, in spite of the school's best efforts in consultation with NEPS, will the psychologist become involved with an individual child for intensive intervention or assessment. This system allows psychologists to give early attention to urgent cases and also to help many more children indirectly than could be seen individually. It also ensures that children are not referred unnecessarily for psychological intervention.

In this context school authorities should raise for consideration with their assigned NEPS psychologist or local NEPS office cases where ongoing concerns remain in relation to pupils social emotional or educational development with a view looking at the appropriateness of direct intervention by the psychologist. It is the product of these discussions which will inform, for example, the number of formal assessment to be undertaken rather than any applied limit thereof.

Psychological Assessments

126. **Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the process that a school should follow if a NEPS assessment recommendation is to have all siblings in a family assessed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26083/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I can inform the Deputy that my Department's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provides educational psychology service to all primary and post primary schools through an assigned NEPS psychologist and in some cases receive assessment services through the Scheme for Commissioning Psychological Assessments (SCPA). Under this scheme schools can have a student

assessment carried out by a member of the panel of private psychologists approved by NEPS, and NEPS will pay the psychologist the fees for this assessment directly.

As previously described to the Deputy and in common with many other psychological services and best international practice, NEPS has adopted a consultative model of service. The focus is on empowering teachers to intervene effectively with pupils whose needs range from mild to severe and transient to enduring. Psychologists use a problem solving and solution focused consultative approach to maximise positive outcomes for these pupils. NEPS encourages schools to use a continuum based assessment and intervention process whereby each school takes responsibility for initial assessment, educational planning and remedial intervention for pupils with learning, emotional or behavioural difficulties. Teachers may consult their NEPS psychologist should they need to at this stage in the process. Only in the event of a failure to make reasonable progress, in spite of the school's best efforts in consultation with NEPS, will the psychologist become involved with an individual child for intensive intervention or assessment.

Discussion of NEPS direct involvement with a specific child or pupil should be based on the direct concerns raised and evidenced in relation to that child's social, emotional or educational development, familial history may inform this process.

As with all other situations I would advise that parents should raise such concerns, in the first instance, with the school principal with a view to his/her discussing them with the assigned NEPS psychologist or local NEPS service in relation to the appropriateness of their direct involvement in the case and the nature of that involvement.

Site Acquisitions

127. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the site acquisition process in respect of a national school (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26093/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): As the Deputy may be aware, a site acquisition process for the school referred to by the Deputy is currently underway. A suitable permanent site for the school has been identified and agreement in principle with the landowners has been reached.

The acquisition process in respect of this site is currently at the conveyancing stage and my officials are working to complete it as expeditiously as possible.

Teachers' Remuneration

128. **Deputy Eugene Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the Government's timeframe to end the pay inequality for teachers in view of the impending publication of the Public Service Pay Commission; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26108/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): As a consequence of the financial crisis, there was a need to enact a number of measures to reduce public expenditure so as to stabilise the country's public finances. A previous Government reduced the salaries and allowances payable to all new entrants to public service recruitment grades by 10% with effect from 1 January 2011. This decision also required that such new entrants would start on the first point of the applicable salary scale, which in the case of teachers had the effect of reducing their

starting pay by a further 4-5%. Later in 2011, the Government placed a cap on the overall level of qualification allowances that could be earned by teachers.

Subsequently in 2012, following the public service-wide review of allowances, the Government withdrew qualification allowances for new teachers altogether. However, the Government partially compensated for this by deciding that new entrant teachers would henceforth commence on a new salary scale which had a starting point higher than the starting point of the old scale.

The public service agreements have allowed a programme of pay restoration for public servants to start. I have used this to negotiate substantial improvements in pay for new teachers. The agreement reached with TUI and INTO will see pay rises of between 15-22% (between €4600 and €6700) for new entrant teachers. The agreements also provide for earlier permanency for younger teachers, new promotion opportunities and new flexibilities in working hours.

The agreements have restored an estimated 75% of the difference in pay for more recently recruited teachers and deliver full equality at later points in the scale. This is substantial progress and strikes an equitable balance with other claims for funding on my Department, particularly needs such as enhanced service for children with special educational needs, for disadvantaged schools, for growing schools, for Higher Education and for apprenticeships.

It must be borne in mind that the pay reduction for post-2011 entrants to the public service applied to all public servants and not just teachers, and that any restoration of these measures in respect of teachers would be expected to be applied elsewhere across the public service. While I am not in a position to provide an estimate of the total cost of restoring all post-1 January 2011 entrants in all areas of the public service to the pre-2011 pay scale arrangements, I can say that in the case of education and training sector employees, including teachers, the estimated current full year cost would be in the order of €85 million. Clearly, the cost across the entire public service would be substantially higher.

However there are other types of equality that we must also bear in mind, for example equality between public servants and people who work elsewhere or don't work at all. It would also not be equal or fair for us to do unaffordable deals with particular groups of public servants that mean that we do not have the money left in the public purse to provide increases in social welfare payments for vulnerable groups, tax reductions for people at work, or investments in improvements in public services that people rely on.

In education, there is a well-established increment system. Teachers are not paid equally. For example, the pay scale for teachers appointed prior to 2011 ranges from €32,009 to €60,155 depending on the date that the individual began teaching. Part of the negotiation to date has secured a convergence of the scales of recruits at different periods.

Any further negotiation on new entrant pay cannot focus on just one sector. A broader assessment of pay and new entrant pay will be informed by the recently published analysis of the Public Service Pay Commission. The Government established the Commission to examine pay levels across the public service, including entry levels of pay. The Government also supports the gradual, negotiated repeal of the FEMPI legislation, having due regard to the priority to improve public services and in recognition of the essential role played by public servants.

I accept that the teacher unions have outstanding pay demands and that the new entrant deal does not travel the full distance that they set out to achieve. However, it does represent significant progress, and the door is not closed to the trade union movement seeking to advance the issue further in the context of public service pay talks. My colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, invited the Public Services Committee of ICTU to discussions on

public service pay and a continued approach to the unwinding of the FEMPI legislation and these discussions are now underway.

School Transport Eligibility

129. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26115/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): School transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department.

Currently almost 116,000 children, including some 12,000 children with special educational needs, are being transported in over 4,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres annually.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kilometres from and are attending their nearest national school as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

An eligible child for whom no transport service is available may, following an application for transport within the prescribed time limits, receive a Remote Area Grant towards the cost of private transport arrangements.

Children wishing to apply for school transport should complete an application form on Bus Éireann's website at www.buseireann.ie.

Appointments to State Boards

130. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the name of each person that sat on the panel to select the new board of Caranua; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26120/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): While the statutory function of appointing members of the Board of Caranua rests with the Minister for Education and Skills, the application and selection process is managed on my behalf by the Public Appointments Service (PAS) in accordance with the Guidelines on Appointments to State Board published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

I can confirm that the PAS assessment panel consisted of the following persons:

Ms Valerie Little, HR Consultant, Chairperson

Dr Fionnuala Waldron, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra

Mr David O'Callaghan, Chairperson of Caranua

Ms Catherine Hynes, Principal Officer, Department of Education and Skills.

Appointments to State Boards

131. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the current CEO of Caranua is a member of the panel to select new board members for that organisation. [26125/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): While the statutory function for appointing members of the Board of Caranua rests with the Minister for Education and Skills, the application and selection process is managed on my behalf by the Public Appointments Service (PAS) in accordance with the Guidelines on Appointments to State Board published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

I can confirm that the Chief Executive of Caranua was not a member of the PAS assessment panel that considered applications from individuals seeking to be appointed to the Board.

Teaching Council of Ireland

132. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the current salary of the CEO of the Teaching Council of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26128/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The salary scale applying to the post of Director of the Teaching Council is Principal Officer (Higher) (PPC) (€87,741-€107,410).

However, the current Director is a serving civil servant on secondment to the Teaching Council from a government department, where he holds the grade of Director (Civil Service). In accordance with the secondment arrangement, the Director retains the salary due to him in his substantive grade of Director (Civil Service) (PPC) (€99,845-€119,514). This is paid to him by his parent department, which recoups from the Teaching Council the amount of his salary equivalent to the post of Director of the Council.

Teaching Council of Ireland

133. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the CEO of the Teaching Council is entitled to a contract of indefinite duration under the fixed-term work Act 2003; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26129/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Teaching Council had a concern as to whether the appointment of the Director for a second term would give rise to a contract of indefinite duration. My Department clarified the contractual terms, which provide for a fixed-term contract in the context of the continuation of a secondment arrangement. Subsequently the Council reappointed the Director for a five year fixed-term from 14 May 2017.

Junior Cycle Reform

134. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding the roll-out of the well-being programme for junior cycle; if the programme will be in place for all students for September 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26130/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): All schools will offer a well-

being programme to those students entering first year in September 2017. Well-being is built on a number of pillars, which include subjects already offered. These subjects include CSPE, PE and SPHE. Schools have the flexibility to add other curricular subjects and initiatives to their well-being programme.

This area of learning will make the school's commitment to well-being visible to students. It will include learning opportunities to enhance the physical, mental, emotional and social well-being of students. It will enable students to build life skills and develop a strong sense of connectedness to their school and to their community.

Planning for well-being in schools involves consideration of four aspects;

- (1) Culture
- (2) Relationships
- (3) Policy and planning
- (4) The curriculum

As with all new subject specifications and programmes the development was informed by extensive consultation and engagement with stakeholders.

The Junior Cycle Well-being programme will begin with 300 hours of timetabled engagement in 2017 and build up to 400 hours by 2020 as the new Junior Cycle is implemented fully in schools.

All the curriculum components of the Well-being curriculum provide opportunities for on-going classroom based assessment and formative feedback. Reporting on students' learning in Well-being happens in two different ways: reporting in first and second year, and reporting as part of the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) at the end of third year.

DEIS Scheme

135. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding the progress on expanding the incredible years programme to all DEIS primary schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26131/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Deputy will be aware that my Department has committed, as part of the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019, to the roll-out of the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme to all DEIS schools. In order to support this development and as part of the Action Plan for Education 2017 I can inform the Deputy that NEPS psychologist number will be increased by 10 staff. In this regard a process is currently underway in conjunction with the Public Appointments Service (PAS) to recruit these psychologists which, it is envisaged, will be in place for the commencement of the 2017/18 academic year.

Furthermore planning is currently in train for the commencement of roll out of the Incredible Years programme, involving an initial 25 courses with 500 teachers from DEIS schools and commencing in the autumn. To this end NEP staff regionally are actively involved with counterparts in the Teacher Education Centres nationwide in arranging venues for these training events, in the scheduling and planning of programme delivery and will, in due course, be issuing invitations to schools in relation to teacher attendance at the events. The programme will continue through 2018 and 2019.

I hope this clarifies the issue for the Deputy.

Schools Mental Health Strategies

136. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department has completed the assessment of supports to schools in the areas of mental health and social and emotional competence as outlined in the action plan for education; the findings of the assessment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26132/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I can inform the Deputy that a comprehensive review of the range of activities, which are relevant to the promotion of mental health and social emotional competence supported by my Department, has been completed. Informed by this work a DES Well-being Steering Group has been formed. This will review DES policy and provide a practice framework aligned with existing policy documents. It will also identify gaps in supports, engage in liaison with other Departments and agencies and map the existing support for schools provided by the DES and other Department's agencies.

In addition the Department of Health has initiated a Pathfinder Project which is examining cross departmental collaboration in regard to youth mental health. Recommendations will be forthcoming from this work. My Department has been an active participant in this Project.

Physical Education

137. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding the development of the senior cycle physical education framework; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26133/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): A new Framework for Senior Cycle Physical Education (non-examinable) has recently been completed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and approved by me.

The Framework will assist schools to design a P.E. programme for those students who may not choose to take P.E. as part of their Leaving Certificate examination. The aim of the Framework is to encourage learners' confident, enjoyable and informed participation in physical activity while in senior cycle and in their future lives.

The Framework is one part of planned, broader provision for physical education at senior cycle. A new specification for Leaving Certificate Physical Education, an examinable subject for Leaving Certificate, has also been recently approved. These developments are in keeping with the strong emphasis from my Department on promoting and encouraging Healthy Life-styles for all students and commitments in the Programme for Partnership Government.

Timing of implementation of the Framework and the new specification will be considered in the context of the planned review of senior cycle.

Residential Institutions Statutory Fund

138. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will provide details of the use of funding by Caranua since it was established; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26134/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): Caranua is an independent statutory body established under the Residential Institutions Statutory Fund Act 2012. The legislation provides that €110 million in contributions from religious congregations will be made available to Caranua to help meet the needs of persons who, as children, were abused in residential institutions.

Approximately €60m had been spent on services for former residents with a further €6m approximately expended on administration costs. Services have been provided to over 4,500 applicants.

It is a statutory requirement that Caranua prepares both an annual report of its activities and proceedings and an annual account of moneys received and expended. The annual reports and accounts for each of the years 2013, 2014 and 2015 have been laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. Those reports and accounts detail Caranua's activities in the years in question and provide appropriate financial information. I understand that the annual report for 2016 will be submitted to me shortly while the accounts will be submitted to me following completion of the audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General. Both documents will be laid before the Houses in the normal manner.

I should point out also that Caranua provides regular updates on its website (www.caranua.ie) regarding its activities.

School Curriculum

139. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the consultation process for the development of the primary curriculum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26135/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): In December last year, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment published proposals related to structure and time in the curriculum for primary schools. These proposals have formed the basis for extensive consultation since then. This consultation is the first time, in almost twenty years, that those working in primary education have had an opportunity to consider the structure of the curriculum, what it should comprise and how time should be allocated within it.

The consultation, which closed recently on May 26 used a number of different formats.

- A major consultative conference took place on March 28 in Dublin Castle and was attended by 190 delegates including teachers, principals, early childhood practitioners and managers, parents, researchers, policy-makers, and members of the wider public. Delegates participated in discussion group sessions as they explored the proposals. I addressed delegates in the afternoon of the conference. Further details about the conference, including recordings of sessions, can be accessed at www.ncca.ie/timestructureconf

- 30+ bilateral meetings were held with different organisations and interest groups.

- 7 focus groups with teachers and principals were organised in different parts of the country. Some education partners additionally organised their own focus groups and used these to inform their written submissions as part of the consultation.

- 2,000+ responses were made to an online questionnaire at www.ncca.ie/timeandstructure

- 55+ written submissions were received.

- consultation meetings with children were organised.

An interim report on the consultation will be discussed by the NCCA Council in June with a final report in the autumn setting out findings of the consultation. Informed by these findings, the NCCA will develop an overview of what a redeveloped primary curriculum might look like—its purpose, philosophical underpinnings, the stages the curriculum will be organised into, the form of curriculum that will apply at each stage—integrated themes, curriculum areas or subjects—the broad content of these, and how much time will be available for the curriculum components, whichever form they take. This work will be the focus of further consultation in 2018.

Literacy Programmes

140. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department has undertaken an interim review of the literacy and numeracy strategy; if the review has been published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26136/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, launched in 2011, set out a vision for raising standards in our early years, primary and post-primary school settings. On 14 March last, I launched the Report of the Interim Review of the Strategy. The Report shows the significant progress which has been made under the Strategy since 2011.

The Report is available at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Literacy-and-Numeracy/Literacy-and-Numeracy.html>.

School Curriculum

141. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding the development of the curriculum programme in respect of ethics and beliefs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26137/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Advisory Group to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector recommended in its report that programmes in Education about Religion and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics be developed. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was asked to explore the development of such programmes.

The NCCA produced a Consultation Paper in 2015 outlining the proposed rationale, vision, aims and features of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, and engaged in an extensive consultation process with patrons, education partners, schools, teachers and parents. The final Consultation Report, which outlines the key messages arising from the consultation process and the implications for the development of a curriculum, was published by the NCCA on 14 February 2017.

In the Report, the NCCA notes that the consultation found that ERB and Ethics is viewed as an important part of a child's education and that there is significant support for the type of teaching and learning outlined in the consultation proposals. However, there are features of the education system that are important contextual considerations for the development and implementation of curriculum provision for ERB and Ethics for primary schools, such as the denominational structure of the system and curriculum overload.

The Consultation Report describes a way forward for the development of integrated provi-

sion for ERB and Ethics as part of the newly-developing primary curriculum.

As a step in advancing the recommendations of the Forum on Patronage in this regard, the NCCA has formed a small network of schools to gather and share examples of good practice in the area of ERB and Ethics for schools to use in supporting and developing their practice in this area. The development of proposals for provision for Education about Religion and Beliefs and Ethics at primary level will also take account of the on-going work on the review of the structure and time allocation in the primary school curriculum.

Junior Cycle Reform

142. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding the development of short courses for the junior cycle; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26138/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): Short courses are designed for 100 hours of engagement over the three years of junior cycle. Some short courses have been designed centrally by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and others by schools themselves or other bodies, using the template provided by the NCCA.

Further details on how to develop a short course for Junior Cycle can be accessed at the following link: <http://www.juniorcycle.ie/Planning/Short-Course-Development>

School Curriculum

143. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department has undertaken a review of the senior cycle programmes, including vocational pathways; the status of the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26139/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): Increasing choice at Senior Cycle is important for student motivation and engagement. It will ensure curriculum development continues to respond to the changing needs of learners, society and the economy.

As outlined in the Action Plan for Education 2017, a review of senior cycle programmes (including Leaving Certificate Applied) and vocational pathways in senior cycle, has been commenced by the NCCA, with a view to recommending areas for development. As a first step, to inform this review, the NCCA has commissioned research to scope international developments in Upper Secondary Education, which is due to be completed in Summer 2017.

Departmental Reports

144. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the STEM education policy statement has been completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26140/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The STEM Report, whose focus is on primary and post-primary education, was published in November 2016 by the STEM Education Review Group under the chairmanship of Professor Brian MacCraith. This report drew upon the expertise of many individuals and organisations and involved significant consultation with a broad range of stakeholders. I welcomed the Report and have prioritised 21 of the

47 actions identified in it.

Work is now underway in my Department on the preparation of a STEM Education Policy Statement and implementation plan. A STEM Steering Group has been established by my Department and consists of DES representatives and a range of external stakeholders. The role of the steering group is to support the development of the policy statement and implementation plan. A consultation process is ongoing in this regard and includes an online consultation facility, consultations with learners and parents and with stakeholders. There is a commitment in the Action Plan for Education to produce the STEM Education policy statement and implementation plan during Q2 2017.

School Curriculum

145. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of schools that offer the politics and society course; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26141/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The roll-out of the new Leaving Certificate subject of Politics and Society commenced in 41 schools from September 2016, following an open invitation to introduce this as an optional Leaving Certificate subject. Politics and Society aims to develop the student's ability to be a reflective and active citizen, in a way that is informed by the insights and skills of social and political science. The introduction of the specification is part of my Department's commemoration of 1916 and its commitment to education for sustainable development. The subject will be available to all schools from September 2018.

School Curriculum

146. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the action taken to date in developing the computer science curriculum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26142/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Action Plan for Education 2017 provides that the new subject of Leaving Certificate Computer Science will be implemented in schools from September 2018. The new subject specification is currently being developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment through its subject development group for Computer Science. Phase 1 of the implementation process is scheduled to commence in September 2018 in a small number of schools, with the subject being available to all schools from September 2020.

Digital Strategy for Schools

147. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the action taken to date in implementing the digital strategy for schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26143/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020, enhancing Teaching, Learning and Assessment was launched by my Department in October 2015. The Strategy is focused on realising the potential of digital technologies to transform the learning experiences of students by helping them become engaged

thinkers, active learners, knowledge constructors and global citizens who participate fully in society and the economy.

The Strategy is developed around four main Themes namely: Teaching, Learning and Assessment using ICT, Teacher Professional Learning, Leadership, Research and Policy, ICT Infrastructure. The Strategy will enable all stakeholders to work together to support the embedding of digital technologies in every classroom in a systematic and focussed way.

Implementation of the Digital Strategy is currently underway. An Implementation Advisory Group has been established to guide its implementation. Membership of the Group comprise representation from the Department, industry, academic experts, practitioners/teachers and representation from the tech voluntary sector.

Key priorities have been identified and are set out in my Department's Action Plan for 2017. Their implementation is under way and include the following:

- The development of a Digital Learning Framework for Teachers and School Leaders to be piloted in Q4 of 2017. Using this Framework, teachers and school leaders will be enabled to plan for the effective integration of digital technologies in teaching practice and school policies, to evaluate progress and to chart an improvement journey.

- Commence updating the eLearning Planning Resource for schools and align with School Self Evaluation and the Digital Learning Framework currently in development. This resource provides a step-by-step guide to the development of the school's eLearning Plan

- Establish a Support Services Planning Group to collaborate on the planning, design and delivery of CPD and other support services to schools to ensure a consistent approach in the embedding of ICT in support programmes.

- Develop guidance to support the establishment of communities of practice within schools or other teacher networks

- Development of strategic partnerships with relevant cultural, educational and/or sporting bodies in order to adapt relevant content into useful learning and teaching resources for schools

- Scope a proposal to incentivise and facilitate schools in innovation, clustering approaches to maximise the impact of digital technologies in teaching and learning

- Provide and facilitate the sharing of examples of good practice regarding the effective use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment, including through the DES Scoil-net portal and the websites of the PDST-TIE and other support services

- Continue to provide improved broadband services to schools where available under the existing Schools Broadband Access Scheme. All post primary schools have high speed broadband. Some 800 primary schools were provided with improved broadband services in 2016 and a further 300 is targeted for 2013.

- Establish a working group to determine how best to provide for high speed broadband for primary schools in collaboration with DCCAIE in the context of the National Broadband Plan and the State Intervention Strategy.

- The Digital Strategy for Schools committed to €210m in funding for multi-annual ICT Infrastructure Grants to schools over the period of the Strategy. The first tranche of this funding (€30m), in respect of the 2017/2018 school year, has already issued to schools

The process to provide opportunities for students to pursue in-depth ICT study in the Se-

nior Cycle and the inclusion of clear statements and objectives on the use of ICT in curriculum specifications and policy initiatives are also key priorities and their implementation has also commenced.

My Department is working towards the phased introduction of Computer Science as a Leaving Certificate subject from September 2018. A Steering Group has been established for this purpose and a draft subject specification is being developed. Coding is included as a short course option for the new Junior Cycle Curriculum. At primary level, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is currently in the process of developing a new primary mathematics curriculum to include computational thinking (including coding) and flexible and creative thinking skills.

ICT is an integral part of all CPD programmes under development.

I recently hosted a Regional Forum in a school in Limerick where I heard ideas and feedback from the educational community and employers based across the region on my Department's plan to embed digital technologies in teaching and learning. Feedback from Forums like this will guide my Department's continued research into the effective use of digital technologies in schools.

My Department is currently finalising a 2017 Digital Strategy Action Plan which I expect to publish shortly.

Departmental Reports

148. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the report on teaching supply will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26144/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Report of the Technical Working Group on Teacher Supply focusses on the development of a model of primary teacher supply, while outlining the work which will be required to establish a model of post primary teacher supply.

The aim of my Department's policy is to achieve a balance between the supply of, and demand for, teachers. The Deputy will see from the Report that this is complex, particularly at post primary level, and it was important that the report was given careful consideration by officials of my Department and that suitable supporting actions were identified before publication. I intend to publish the TWG's report shortly.

Schools Refurbishment

149. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding school renovations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26154/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I can confirm that funding was allocated to the school in question under my Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme in 2016 for the extension of a Science Room.

The project was devolved to the local Education and Training Board for delivery. The progression of the project is, therefore, a matter for that body which is also the school's Patron. If the school has concerns about the delivery of the project, it should contact its Patron directly.

Questions - Written Answers
Teacher Training Provision

150. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of training CPD days both primary and secondary school teachers receive each year; the cost for those days; and his Department's total budget for teacher CPD training and the number of teachers. [26161/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): My Department spent approximately €46.5m on teacher continuing professional development (CPD) in 2016 across the primary and post primary sectors.

The spend of €46.5m includes all costs associated with the provision of CPD at primary and post primary level funded by my Department of which €23.9m funded Post primary programmes and €22.6m funded Primary programmes.

Teachers at primary and post primary level can access a range of continuing professional development programmes (CPD) through the teacher support services funded by my Department. A table detailing the number of CPD units provided through this mechanism for the period 2013-2016 follows.

In addition to this provision there are other publicly funded CPD options for teachers including local courses provided by the national network of education centres, support offered by subject associations and teacher networks, and CPD offered through organisations supported by my Department such as COGG, NAPD and IPPN.

There are also a range of CPD options which teachers can access through private providers.

The information on CPD units provided sets out the number of interactions a teacher support service has with teachers. Interactions range from a 2 hour session in an education centre to a suite of sessions on a particular issue or, in the case of college based events, a full post graduate course.

Overall Statistics on CPD Units provided*

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016
Attendance	167,939	170,719	183,061	206,127

Schools Building Projects Status

151. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills further to Parliamentary Question No. 269 of 11 April 2017, if a building project at a school (details supplied) will proceed to construction stage before the commencement of the 2017/2018 school year in view of the urgent need to provide additional and upgraded school accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26166/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The project to which the Deputy refers is included in my Department's 6 Year Construction Programme 2016-21.

The school and its design team submitted their Stage 2(b) report for this major building project to my Department recently and the submission is currently under review.

Following receipt of that submission my Department authorised the Board of Management to instruct their Design Team to commence the pre-qualification process for the assessment of suitably qualified contractors to which the project can be tendered. The Design Team has com-

menced this process and the closing date for the etenders advertisement is 19 June 2017.

On completion of the review of the stage 2b submission and the Design Team's assessment of suitably qualified contractors my Department will revert to the Board of Management with regard to the further progression to tender and construction stages at that time.

Apprenticeship Programmes

152. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a person (details supplied) can resit an exam in a college in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26216/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): This is an operational matter for SOLAS, who manage the apprenticeship programme, and I have asked them to contact the Deputy directly to discuss the possible options open to the individual concerned.

School Guidance Counsellors

153. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the commitment in the programme for Government to enhance guidance counselling in secondary schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26261/17]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 has a specific action to enhance guidance counselling at second-level as resources permit. A significant move was made in the 2016/17 school year with the restoration of half of the cut in provision for guidance counselling. This was equivalent to the restoration of 300 posts.

The allocation of a whole time equivalent of a further additional 100 teachers to second level schools in Budget 2017 is a restoration of a further 16% of the teaching resources that were removed.

The delivery of this 16% restoration in addition to the 50% restoration in Budget 2016, means that two thirds of the Guidance allocation that was withdrawn in Budget 2012 will be restored in our schools with effect from September 2017.

The 400 posts will be provided in respect of Guidance as a separate allocation on school's staffing schedules from September 2017. The guidance allocation shown separately on the staffing schedules represents 0.4 of the PTR for each school. DEIS schools will have a guidance allocation of 1.15 of the PTR which represents the total guidance allocation that was restored to these schools.

I will continue to consider further restorations in future Budgets.

Building Regulations

154. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government if his attention has been drawn to the fact that standards in buildings for disabled access toilets are currently designed to help those that have little or no use of their

legs but still have upper body strength and does not take into consideration the different needs of those with a disability and the varying degrees of upper body strength; his plans to ensure that all future publicly funded building projects will have properly designed disabled access toilet facilities to ensure that all persons with a disability have access to a properly designed toilet space with a legislative requirement for same being incorporated into building regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26080/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): New buildings and extensions or material alterations to existing buildings must comply with the legal minimum performance standards set out in the Building Regulations 1997 - 2017. In this context, the Building Regulations (Part M Amendment) Regulations 2010, which came into effect on 1 January 2012, set out the minimum statutory requirements that a building must achieve in respect of access. The accompanying Technical Guidance Document M – Access and Use (2010) provides guidance on how to comply the requirements.

The requirements of Part M aim to ensure that regardless of age, size or disability:

- new buildings other than dwellings are accessible and usable;
- extensions to existing buildings other than dwellings are, where practicable, accessible and useable;
- material alterations to existing buildings other than dwellings increase the accessibility and usability of existing buildings, where practicable;
- certain changes of use to existing buildings other than dwellings increase the accessibility and usability of existing buildings where practicable; and
- new dwellings are visitable.

The objective in the case of provision of sanitary facilities is to provide independently accessible facilities that meet the needs of people with a wide range of abilities. Technical Guidance Document M gives detailed guidance on both the provision and the design of sanitary facilities.

Part M of the Building Regulations aims to foster an inclusive approach to the design and construction of the built environment. While the Part M requirements may be regarded as a statutory minimum level of provision, the accompanying technical guidance encourages building owners and designers to have regard to the design philosophy of universal design and to consider making additional provisions where practicable and appropriate.

While the latest iteration of Part M of the Building Regulations initially coincided with the general downturn in economic and construction activity, its positive effects on access and use in the built environment will now be seen more widely as economic recovery takes hold and construction activity continues to gather momentum and moves onto a sustainable footing. While there are no proposals to amend Part M at this point in time, the Building Regulations, including Part M requirements, are subject to ongoing review in the interests of safety and the well-being of persons in the built environment and to ensure that due regard is taken of changes in construction techniques, technological progress and innovation.

Housing Policy

155. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Lo-

cal Government if he has sought approval for the land bank plan from the European Commission under state aid rules; and his views on whether the direct subsidies to developers proposed under the plan could amount to state aid for the purposes of EU law or could amount to a public works contract for the purposes of EU law as was considered by the European Court of Justice in a case (details supplied). [26124/17]

Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney): As you are aware, the State has a significant land bank and given the current acute housing shortage, with the associated problems of access and affordability facing households, it is crucial that much needed housing is delivered from these sites in the shortest possible time-frame and with the maximum social dividend. In order to promote the development of these sites, on 27 April 2017, I published the Rebuilding Ireland Housing Land Map. The Map is a vital initial step in the new strategic approach to State land management, which will be further developed through the forthcoming National Planning Framework, to be titled “Ireland 2040: Our Plan”.

The datasets published on the map include details of over 700 local authority and Housing Agency-owned sites, totaling some 1,700 hectares, as well 30 sites (covering about 200 hectares) owned by State or semi-State bodies. The map is available to view on the Rebuilding Ireland website at: <http://rebuildingireland.ie/news/rebuilding-ireland-land-map/>.

The specific approach to housing delivery on each site, including the optimum tenure mix and delivery mechanism, is a matter for the local authority concerned, the elected members included, who are best placed to understand the housing needs in their areas. Given the differences in terms of scale, location and other site characteristics the approach from site to site will vary with some sites suitable for social housing only and others being more suited to a mixed tenure approach.

Mixed-tenure development on suitable publicly-owned sites provides an important avenue for the delivery of social and affordable housing quickly in a fully integrated and sustainable community. Opening up the supply of State land in this way, for mixed-tenure housing, is a critically important policy in addressing a situation where the pace of recovery in the house development sector is slower than it needs to be, to meet demand. In practical terms, the development of these sites will mean accelerating social housing delivery and securing more homes for sale and rent at lower and more affordable price points. In this regard, I welcome the fact that two of the Dublin local authorities have already brought forward four key, large-scale sites, capable of delivering 3,000 new homes, and I expect other local authorities to follow suit.

With regard to the specific judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union referred to, I understand that the case involved “tax incentives” and “subsidy mechanisms”, neither of which are part of the State land initiative. In such circumstances, the question of EU State Aid approval does not arise. Insofar as procurement is concerned, the development of each site will be subject to an open competitive process.

Local Authority Housing Provision

156. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government when he plans to introduce the roll-out of choice-based letting in Galway county council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26174/17]

Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney): The allocation of social housing support is a matter for the relevant housing author-

ity in accordance with the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and associated regulations. Section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 requires all housing authorities, as a reserved function, to make an allocation scheme determining the order of priority to be accorded in the allocation of dwellings to households qualified for social housing support and to households approved for a transfer, the allocation of which would, in the opinion of the authority, meet the accommodation needs and requirements of the households.

The Government's Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness contains a commitment to extend the use of choice-based letting (CBL) by local authorities as a method of allocating social housing support. This is in recognition of the benefits that a CBL system can deliver to social housing applicants, existing social housing tenants and to local authorities.

On 30 September 2016, I made the Social Housing Allocation (Amendment) Regulations 2016 which required that all local authorities must, if they have not already done so, provide for CBL as a method of allocation in their housing allocation schemes by 31 December 2016.

I understand that a majority of local authorities have now used CBL as a way of allocating some of their social housing properties. Where it has been introduced, the feedback has been very positive both from the authorities themselves and the customers they serve.

To facilitate the wider operation of CBL my Department issued updated guidance to authorities in December 2016. The Department will continue to liaise with housing authorities with a view to ensuring that CBL is implemented as widely as possible across the country.

Local Authority Staff Data

157. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the number of permanent employees that ceased working with Galway county council in each of the years 2011 to 2016 in tabular form. [26175/17]

158. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the number of permanent positions that remain unfilled in Galway county council in each of the years 2011 to 2016 in tabular form. [26176/17]

Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 157 and 158 together.

My Department gathers quarterly data on staff numbers in local authorities. The data gathered does not provide detail in respect of the number of permanent employees that ceased working with Galway County Council and accordingly the information requested is not available in my Department. Broad staffing numbers for the local authority sector are available on the Public Service Numbers Databank which is hosted and maintained by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and is available at the following link: <http://databank.per.gov.ie/>. The Databank provides access to information from 1980 onwards.

Under section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, each Chief Executive is responsible for the staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authorities for which he or she is responsible. In this regard, it is a matter for each individual Chief Executive to recruit and assign staff to specific functional areas.

Local Authority Staff Data

159. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the number of full-time employees working in Galway county council from 2011 to 2016 in tabular form. [26177/17]

Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department is responsible for workforce planning for the local government sector, including monitoring of local government sector employment levels. Staffing numbers for the local authority sector, broken down by individual local authority, are available on the Public Service Numbers Databank which is hosted and maintained by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and is available at the following link: <http://databank.per.gov.ie/>. The Databank provides access to information from 1980 onwards.

Local Authority Staff Data

160. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the number of director of services positions not filled in Galway county council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26178/17]

161. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the number of director of services positions not filled in Galway city council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26179/17]

Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 160 and 161 together.

There is currently one vacancy for Director of Services in Galway County Council. A competition to fill this vacancy is currently underway, through the Public Appointments Service.

There are currently no vacancies at Director of Services level in Galway City Council.

Under section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, each Chief Executive is responsible for the staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authorities for which he or she is responsible. In this regard, recruitment is a matter for each individual Chief Executive.

Local Authority Staff Data

162. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the number of full-time engineers and senior engineers that are full time employees of Galway County Council engaged in the road maintenance programme in each of the years 2011 to 2016 by area in Oranmore, Athenry, Tuam, Connemara, Ballinasloe, Loughrea, Gort and Portumna in tabular form. [26180/17]

163. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the number of full-time outdoor staff that are full-time employees of Galway County Council engaged in the road maintenance programme from 2011 to 2016 by area in Oranmore, Athenry, Tuam, Connemara, Ballinasloe, Loughrea, Gort and Portumna in tabular form. [26181/17]

164. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the number of seasonal employees employed by Galway County Council engaged in road maintenance programme from 2011 to 2016 by area in Oranmore, Athenry,

Tuam, Connemara, Ballinasloe, Loughrea, Gort and Portumna in tabular form. [26182/17]

Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 162 to 164, inclusive, together.

My Department gathers quarterly data on staff numbers in local authorities. The data gathered does not provide detail in respect of the number of full time engineers, senior engineers, full time employees and seasonal employees of Galway County Council that are engaged in the road maintenance programme in Oranmore, Athenry, Tuam, Connemara, Ballinasloe, Loughrea, Gort and Portumna. Accordingly, the information requested is not available in my Department.

Under section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, each Chief Executive is responsible for the staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authorities for which he or she is responsible. In this regard, it is a matter for each individual Chief Executive to recruit and assign staff to specific functional areas.

Departmental Contingency Planning

165. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he has implemented procedural changes in the workings of his Department to mitigate the chances that the issue of reported delays in maternity benefit which occurred recently does not reoccur; if so, the details of such changes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26235/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Maternity benefit is a payment made to women who are on maternity leave from work and covered by social insurance (PRSI). The rate of maternity benefit was increased to €235 in the 2017 Budget and allowances for dependent adults and children are available to those who qualify.

Maternity benefit section is currently experiencing some difficulty with processing all claims in advance of their maternity leave commencement date. Corrective actions have been taken and good progress is being made. However, there are still a number of mothers that will receive their first payment up to 3 to 4 weeks after they commence their maternity leave. The number has reduced to 700 at 29 May; down from 1,100 at 22 May.

Additional staff have been assigned to the section. Staff have also been moved from other areas in Buncrana and Letterkenny, to work on processing maternity claims as a temporary measure. Information section in Sligo is handling phone calls, freeing up maternity benefit staff for claim processing work. Staff have also been working overtime, including Saturdays, to ensure as many claims as possible get processed and paid by their commencement date.

Operational processes, procedures and the organisation of work are continually reviewed to ensure that claim processing capability is maximised. This is also the case with maternity benefit and the lessons learned from the corrective actions taken will be evaluated and considered as part of this continual review process.

The focus remains on ensuring that all claims are processed as quickly as possible.

Social Welfare Benefits

166. **Deputy Jim Daly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the entitlements available to persons returning to education other than the back to education allowance; and if he will make

a statement on the matter. [26072/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Back to Education Allowance Scheme (BTEA) enables eligible persons to pursue approved education courses and to continue to receive income support for the duration of a course of study, subject to meeting certain conditions. The BTEA is designed primarily to support second chance education.

A new €500 annual Cost of Education Allowance will be made available to BTEA participants with children from the next academic year in September. This will help parents, including lone parents, to return to education

The BTEA is not intended to be an alternative form of funding for people entering or re-entering the third level education system. The Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant, payable by the Department of Education and Skills, represents the primary support for persons pursuing education. In general, most BTEA customers will also have certain registration and related college fees paid by SUSI.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

State Pension (Contributory) Eligibility

167. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will address an anomaly whereby a person (details supplied) who is living alone can be denied a living alone allowance in view of the fact they are in receipt of a qualified adult payment on their partner's pension but 80% of this pension is being taken as part of a fair deal agreement due to the fact the partner is in a nursing home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26103/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): State pension (contributory) is a qualifying payment for receipt of living alone increase, payable to primary claimants where the eligibility conditions are met. The increase is not payable to qualified adults of primary claimants.

On 1 February 2017, a form to facilitate direct payment of the qualified adult portion of the spouse's total pension entitlement was issued to the person concerned. There is no record of that form being returned. A second form has been issued to the person concerned. On return of the completed form, arrangements will be made to immediately direct the qualified adult portion of their spouse's state pension (contributory) to them, by their preferred payment method.

In addition, the person concerned may wish to make an application for state pension (non-contributory) in their own right. An application form for this means tested payment has also been sent to the person concerned.

Following assessment of entitlement, the person concerned will be awarded the most financially beneficial rate of payment. As a primary claimant, the person concerned would then be eligible to apply for an increase for living alone, if the eligibility conditions are met.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Code Reform

168. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he has considered introducing a basic income along the lines of pilot schemes in the Netherlands, Italy and Finland;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26195/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The government does not have any plans to introduce a basic income scheme. The tax and social welfare system is continually reviewed, in the budgetary process and otherwise, in terms of its impact in redistributing income while ensuring the maintenance of incentives for people to contribute to society through employment.

We are aware that limited experiments with what might be referred to as “partial” basic income approaches are underway or planned in other countries. We will follow the outcome of these experiments with interest to see if they provide any lessons that might be applied to aspects of the Irish system.

In ongoing review of the system we will also take account of the recent modelling research from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that warns that a universal basic income scheme would require large tax increases, provide less effective supports for the poor and result in a large number of people gaining and losing from its introduction.

Employment Support Services

169. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Social Protection his views on the outsourcing of particular aspects of unemployment services here to private companies, for example, through the JobPath scheme; if he has had discussions with the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation regarding international trade deals such as CETA and the potential impact they may have on the delivery of social protection services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26197/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As the Deputy will be aware, the State’s Public Employment Service is managed by my Department and delivered directly by its own Intreo service as well as by contracted private companies, such as JobPath, Local Employment Service (LES) and Job Club providers. The Department has contracts in place with over 60 companies for the provision of these services.

It is important to note, that while these service elements are provided by third parties, jobseekers engaged with these services remain customers of the Department.

The companies themselves employ a large number of staff, with circa 600 staff being employed by Jobpath providers, circa 300 by LES providers and circa 100 by Job Club providers. It is the role of these staff to support and assist jobseekers to enter / re-enter employment in the open labour market.

In addition, it is important to note, that the Department has for many years contracted extensively with third parties for the delivery of a range of other services including community based programmes and schemes.

JobPath is a contract model whereby the providers are paid by results, in other words they are paid when they achieve sustained employment outcomes for jobseekers. This payment model contrasts with the approach used to fund the LES and Job Clubs where the providers are paid by inputs. In other words they are paid an amount that is agreed at the beginning of each year based on forecast activity levels. The success or otherwise of the Local Employment Service or Job Clubs provider in securing employment for jobseekers does not affect the payment amount.

When JobPath was developed fears were expressed that it would take-over from or substitute for the LES. However this was not the intention and it has not happened. The purpose of JobPath was, and is, to complement and augment the existing service capacity of the Department including the LES. In fact, the capacity introduced by JobPath has enabled the Department, in line with international norms, to reduce the workload of LES mediators and enhance the service being delivered by the LES: by reducing the LES staff caseloads to a maximum of 1:120 jobseekers.

The department continues to monitor the services being delivered by the various companies in order to provide the best possible service for jobseekers.

In relation to the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), this will not affect the delivery of social protection services

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Industrial Relations

170. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will address his recent comments regarding restricting the right to strike in essential services; his views on whether such a restriction would be a breach of Ireland's international human rights obligations, for example, under the European Convention on Human Rights; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26198/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I have no intention to remove employees' right to strike. However where a dispute is in an essential service, a strike can give rise to huge disruption for the public. It is my view that, it is in the interests of the public, employees and employers, such disputes should be resolved with the least disruption.

Departmental Staff Redeployment

171. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the extent to which staff can be redeployed within his Department to deal expeditiously with the appeals backlog; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26241/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department, like all Government departments and agencies is required to operate within a staff ceiling figure and a commensurate administrative staffing budget, which for this Department has involved reductions in staff.

The staffing needs for all areas within the Department are continuously reviewed, taking account of workloads, management priorities and the ongoing need to respond to new increasing demands in a wide range of services. This is to ensure that the best use is made of all available resources with a view to providing an efficient service to those who rely on the schemes operated by the Department.

The overall average processing time, across all schemes, for appeals requiring an oral hearing reduced from 52.5 weeks in 2011 to 25.5 weeks in 2015, 24.1 weeks in 2016 and 24.4 weeks to date in 2017. The overall average time taken to finalise appeals decided by way of a summary decision has also improved in recent years from a peak of 25.1 weeks in 2011 to 18.1 weeks in 2015, 17.6 weeks in 2016 and 18.1 weeks to date in 2017.

The quasi-judicial nature of the appeals system means that there are inevitable time-lags involved. The time taken is proportionate to the complexity of many of the issues under appeal which require a high level of judgement, and the need to ensure due process and natural justice.

Appeal processing times are kept under constant scrutiny by the Chief Appeals Officer. The Deputy will be aware that significant effort and resources have been devoted in recent years to reducing the length of the time taken to finalise an appeal and that as a consequence processing times have improved quite considerably.

State Pension (Contributory) Eligibility

172. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the extent to which he may review the current system used in the calculation to entitlement to a contributory old age pension to address the imbalance whereby persons with fewer contributions can receive a higher payment than those with considerably higher number of contributions to ensure that equity prevails, particularly for those disadvantaged by method of calculation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26242/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Expenditure on pensions, at approximately €7.3 billion, is the largest block of expenditure in my Department, representing some 37% of its expenditure. Demographic change alone will increase this by over €220 million this year. Maintaining the rate of the State pension is critical to protecting older people from poverty.

State pension (contributory) is an entitlement built up through PRSI contributions, and is not impacted upon by the means of the pensioner. It is one of three pensions paid by the Department of Social Protection to those over 66, and its rate of payment is related to contributions made over the years into the Social Insurance Fund, which fund the scheme on a 'Pay As You Go' basis. As such, those who have paid more into that fund are more likely to be paid under that scheme.

There are two State pensions related to reaching state pension age. Firstly, the State pension (non-contributory) is a means tested pension and is funded by general taxation. Secondly, the State pension (contributory) is not means tested and is paid from the Social Insurance Fund.

In Ireland, as in other countries, the contributory pension is primarily aimed at people with sustained contributions towards the Social Insurance Fund which finances it, on a pay as you go basis, and rewards such contributions with greater entitlements and coverage for a range of benefits, including contributory pension entitlements. It is important to ensure that those qualifying for a contributory pension have made a sustained contribution to the Social Insurance Fund over their working lives. To ensure that the individual can maximise their entitlement to a State pension (contributory), all contributions paid or credited over their working life from when they first enter insurable employment until pension age are taken into account when assessing their entitlement and the level of that entitlement.

The home-makers scheme makes qualification for a higher rate of State pension (contributory) easier for those who take time out of the workforce for caring duties. The scheme, which was introduced in and took effect for periods from 1994, allows up to 20 years spent caring for children under 12 years of age (or caring for incapacitated people over that age) to be disregarded in the calculation of the pensioners yearly average. This may have the effect of increasing the yearly average of the pensioner, which is used to set the rate of their pension, and may in turn qualify them for a higher rate of payment. The disregard does not involve the award of

credits, and entitlements are still subject to the standard qualifying conditions for State pension contributory also being satisfied, including a minimum of 520 paid contributions being paid before reaching pension age.

This scheme was not introduced retrospectively for periods prior to its introduction. My Department has estimated that the annual cost of extending the Homemakers scheme to allow people to avail of the full 20 years currently allowed under the scheme, encompassing periods prior to 1994, could cost some €290m in 2017, and this figure would rise at a faster rate than the rate of the overall cost of State pensions. This is a very significant cost, and the main beneficiaries would be people who already have significant household means, and who do not therefore qualify for an alternative means-tested payment.

Where someone does not qualify for a full rate contributory pension, they may qualify for an alternative payment. If their spouse has a contributory pension, they may qualify for an Increase for a Qualified Adult amounting up to 90% of a full rate pension. Alternatively, they may qualify for a State pension (non-contributory), which amounts up to 95% of the maximum contributory rate.

For example, a person with a yearly average of 20 contributions paid or credited per year may qualify for a reduced rate SPC of €202.80. However, they can instead be paid a higher amount through the non-contributory pension, unless their means are over €52.50 per week (or €105 for a married couple), at a minimum payment rate of €204.50 (maximum rate is €227), which would bring their total personal means (including their pension) to over €257 per week. Their household means test ignores their spouse's state pension, the capital value of their home, and has generous income and capital asset disregards, where applicable. This minimum of €257 doesn't include rent allowance, household benefits or fuel allowance. It is also higher than the €238.30 received by a person solely dependent upon a maximum rate State pension (contributory), who would receive no benefit from any change to the method of calculation of contributory pension entitlements, and they would experience a loss if such a change was financed by reducing the core rate of the State pension, or by moderating increases in the future.

The Actuarial Review of the Fund in 2012 confirmed that the Fund provides better value to female rather than male contributors, due to the redistributive nature of the Fund.

The National Pensions Framework (2010) proposed that a "Total Contributions Approach" (TCA) should replace the yearly average approach for new pensioners from 2020. The aim of this approach is to make the rate of contributory pension more closely match contributions made by a person. Officials of my Department are currently working on the detailed development of the TCA with a view to making proposals for consideration later in the year. This is a very significant reform with considerable legal, administrative, and technical elements in its implementation. An important element in the final design of the scheme will be the position of people who have gaps in their contribution records for various reasons, and this factor is being considered very carefully in developing this reform.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Schemes Data

173. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of women throughout the country that do not qualify for a contributory pension due to the marriage ban which forced them to retire from work particularly in the public service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26243/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The ‘marriage bar’ describes a rule that existed in most of the public service and some private sector employments, where women were required to leave their employment upon marriage. This practice was abolished in 1973 when Ireland joined the EEC. As employees in the public service generally paid a reduced rate of PRSI, which provided no cover for the State pension (contributory), the marriage bar would not generally have impacted on State pension entitlement, as they would not have qualified for that payment in the first place had they remained in public sector employment.

To qualify for a state pension (contributory) a person must satisfy a number of criteria. One of these is that they have at least 520 paid contributions (i.e. 10 years). However this of itself does not qualify someone for a full rate contributory pension. As with such pensions in other countries, there is a separate criterion to decide the rate of payment for those who do qualify.

For those who have insufficient contributions to qualify for a full State pension (contributory), there are supports available in the overall State pension system which assist some pensioners in qualification for a contributory payment. For those who do not qualify for a full rate contributory pension, they may qualify for a means-tested non-contributory pension of up to 95% of the full contributory pension.

There are no statistics available to my Department detailing the numbers of public servants who were required by the Marriage Bar to leave the Public Service, and who didn’t then take up employment in the private sector. Such statistics would include people who have not paid PRSI for many decades, and who in many cases would not have made a claim under the State pension system. The Deputy will understand that if, for example, someone was in the public service up to 1972 or earlier, then left the workforce altogether, and now is dependent upon their spouse who has a public service pension, they will not generally receive a payment from my Department, and so the data required by the Deputy is not held by my Department.

Any questions regarding the number of public servants affected by the Marriage bar would be a matter for the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Rent Supplement Scheme Administration

174. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the extent to which his Department can assist those in danger of becoming homeless with particular reference to situations whereby a primary payment is terminated and rent support likewise as a consequence resulting in hardship, anxiety and despair; if he will ensure that in such cases rent support is not terminated until all else has been decided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26244/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Rent supplement plays a vital role in housing families and individuals, with the scheme supporting some 43,700 recipients for which the Government has provided €253 million for in 2017. I can assure the Deputy that every effort is made so that rent supplement tenants are supported by my Department ensuring where possible that they can remain in their homes.

Continued entitlement to rent supplement is not linked to entitlement to other social welfare schemes, however the rent supplement claim may be reviewed following a decision to suspend or disallow a primary social welfare payment as there may be a change to the claimant’s circumstances that could affect eligibility. During a review of a rent supplement claim, the Community Welfare Service (CWS) staff will engage with the claimant to establish continued

eligibility as quickly as possible and limit any delay to payments. Any person in this situation is encouraged to contact the Department's CWS responsible for their rent supplement claim to discuss their situation.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits Data

175. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of applications received for contributory old age pension, jobseeker's allowance, non-contributory old age pension, disability allowance, invalidity pension and carer's allowance, respectively, by month in each of the years 2015 to 2016, and to date in 2017; the number of cases granted, refused, granted on appeal and refused on appeal, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26245/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The information requested by the Deputy is detailed in the following tables:

Carer's Allowance 2015

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	1,309	1,267	686	66	105	7	104
February	1,579	1,383	756	79	102	19	141
March	1,722	1,342	725	57	96	13	61
April	1,529	1,226	654	67	129	10	105
May	1,664	1,241	585	56	103	8	139
June	1,694	1,139	623	44	127	13	132
July	1,625	1,305	746	17	84	8	97
August	1,348	944	495	57	124	16	119
September	1,649	1,238	665	33	108	18	143
October	1,649	1,265	742	2	117	15	114
November	1,761	1,267	754	101	138	14	113
December	1,400	761	489	-	119	14	87

Carer's Allowance 2016

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	1,391	1,023	625	111	100	16	118
February	1,975	1,325	653	2	102	11	136
March	1,831	1,087	610	59	89	13	116
April	1,856	1,190	631	38	88	10	81
May	2,077	1,405	714	68	125	7	97
June	1,940	1,608	864	56	108	17	93
July	1,928	2,137	1,294	39	132	11	74
August	1,864	1,934	1,290	30	103	12	92

Questions - Written Answers

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
September	2,036	2,366	1,411	28	101	15	117
October	2,137	1,848	1,217	73	135	8	112
November	1,976	2,107	1,187	63	141	7	91
December	1,711	1,278	648	248	151	18	110

Carer's Allowance 2017

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	1,651	1,679	964	78	111	14	109
February	2,163	1,594	664	70	128	11	113
March	2,427	1,618	743	64	127	10	95
April	2,048	1,206	537	91	85	10	64

Disability Allowance 2015

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	1,594	1,181	1,848	108	313	12	132
February	1,913	1,476	1,587	110	318	7	196
March	1,745	1,455	1,490	132	212	1	148
April	1,663	1,301	1,194	147	274	5	142
May	2,277	1,361	951	133	272	4	139
June	1,872	1,089	1,155	77	287	10	154
July	2,312	1,291	1,267	200	229	9	88
August	1,590	1,198	1,125	138	286	9	131
September	2,246	1,378	1,345	59	368	7	168
October	1,737	1,464	1,054	104	262	9	127
November	1,976	1,429	1,317	149	281	7	174
December	1,613	1,191	467	86	282	5	152

Disability Allowance 2016

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	1,634	1,146	1,468	91	203	13	107
February	1,936	1,053	1,265	98	287	7	158
March	2,155	1,165	861	74	221	5	138
April	1,986	1,458	696	63	293	8	131
May	1,941	1,349	909	93	288	8	121
June	2,203	1,490	941	31	201	5	94
July	1,837	1,546	1,150	30	234	5	101
August	2,126	1,475	938	169	163	10	80

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Al- lowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
September	1,973	1,843	876	48	237	7	106
October	2,155	1,632	962	51	260	6	124
November	2,471	1,483	1,436	36	198	6	95
December	1,387	1,029	525	31	245	8	112

Disability Allowance 2017

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Al- lowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	1,577	1,385	1,318	36	137	7	100
February	2,179	1,469	885	31	155	13	105
March	2,507	1,552	1,198	61	165	3	88
April	1,840	1,065	956	61	159	3	75

Invalidity Pension 2015

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Al- lowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	819	660	516	51	80	2	32
February	727	625	452	43	80	-	27
March	726	619	471	52	102	2	44
April	607	547	457	55	109	1	44
May	915	765	491	47	162	-	44
June	900	805	425	23	141	2	52
July	988	830	413	27	72	1	36
August	786	541	308	49	107	-	31
September	763	619	278	35	70	3	27
October	828	629	410	1	70	3	22
November	792	593	497	126	82	3	35
December	603	458	352	2	60	-	27

Invalidity Pension 2016

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Al- lowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	776	562	343	94	83	-	35
February	792	603	291	1	70	2	19
March	791	581	384	110	74	-	30
April	734	644	248	67	62	1	27
May	710	658	324	87	87	-	52
June	723	666	312	26	55	3	5
July	659	599	348	31	64	-	39
August	710	479	261	47	25	-	15
September	940	710	479	14	43	-	22
October	822	729	398	74	35	2	18

Questions - Written Answers

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
November	927	672	304	65	46	-	24
December	550	564	217	26	38	2	16

Invalidity Pension 2017

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	860	820	488	64	35	-	27
February	1,007	798	336	52	45	2	23
March	849	817	375	59	24	-	28
April	762	723	338	63	25	1	17

State Pension Contributory 2015

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	3,654	1,610	779	-	3	1	10
February	3,875	2,391	944	12	1	1	13
March	3,266	2,298	849	5	1	-	9
April	3,078	2,141	791	2	5	1	11
May	3,337	2,239	847	2	1	-	8
June	2,876	2,378	637	8	6	-	10
July	3,330	1,848	775	-	6	-	11
August	2,777	1,752	601	1	3	1	10
September	2,910	2,544	957	3	1	1	6
October	3,067	2,162	843	1	5	-	7
November	3,474	1,843	1,040	7	2	-	13
December	2,258	1,456	664	7	2	-	5

State Pension Contributory 2016

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	3,508	2,128	730	2	3	1	8
February	3,926	2,152	844	7	2	2	28
March	3,126	1,938	862	4	3	2	22
April	3,836	2,383	818	5	1	-	17
May	3,333	2,228	894	8	7	1	15
June	3,183	2,281	684	6	4	1	13
July	2,946	2,221	661	6	2	2	20
August	2,987	1,912	606	3	-	-	10
September	3,405	2,442	1,078	-	4	1	17

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
October	3,126	2,132	954	1	6	2	24
November	2,902	2,448	942	6	-	-	15
December	2,153	1,682	630	8	1	1	12

State Pension Contributory 2017

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	3,057	2,180	871	5	3	-	15
February	4,603	2,519	1,063	9	4	1	13
March	3,463	2,699	1,009	4	1	1	16
April	2,963	2,115	717	5	-	-	22

State Pension Non-Contributory 2015

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	1,094	561	236	7	7	5	16
February	1,016	614	186	4	3	1	8
March	928	594	164	4	3	2	7
April	815	672	175	3	2	3	12
May	802	649	159	3	9	2	17
June	804	649	157	6	6	4	5
July	805	845	196	3	1	3	9
August	654	564	118	5	7	3	23
September	705	610	215	9	6	2	16
October	718	611	211	1	2	-	15
November	829	755	227	6	11	1	10
December	562	551	144	3	4	1	7

State Pension Non-Contributory 2016

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	852	706	255	2	4	4	12
February	953	719	209	8	9	3	14
March	786	559	156	4	8	1	14
April	794	665	195	5	6	3	12
May	863	817	230	4	5	2	11
June	802	741	179	7	8	1	14
July	668	756	185	5	3	3	17
August	765	750	178	6	2	-	12

Questions - Written Answers

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
September	748	555	187	8	9	2	17
October	778	724	234	11	4	3	14
November	740	719	215	15	11	3	12
December	464	421	109	6	7	5	17

State Pension Non-Contributory 2017

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	879	569	205	7	9	3	14
February	947	644	168	6	11	2	15
March	903	640	184	3	11	1	17
April	716	499	147	4	5	3	8

Jobseeker's Allowance 2015

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	16,519	15,844	345	61	97	27	260
February	11,378	10,676	333	87	80	18	279
March	11,373	9,280	305	47	55	21	144
April	11,912	12,137	309	31	85	22	185
May	8,776	7,729	236	62	69	14	191
June	13,626	10,303	245	37	73	22	156
July	14,473	14,692	288	43	58	7	162
August	8,065	7,894	234	29	70	26	227
September	8,866	8,016	229	40	57	19	195
October	10,047	7,911	222	43	81	23	234
November	11,644	11,517	331	44	56	17	150
December	10,452	8,153	193	35	39	8	125

Jobseeker's Allowance 2016

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	14,643	14,479	244	35	102	19	252
February	11,648	10,874	299	41	59	15	174
March	10,687	8,610	237	41	77	21	241
April	11,047	11,712	251	73	41	13	88
May	9,720	8,248	206	45	64	17	196
June	12,348	9,580	202	38	62	10	152
July	13,601	13,376	225	24	66	30	187
August	8,984	8,909	217	36	52	12	141
September	8,351	7,797	214	55	55	10	178
October	7,714	6,988	219	113	80	32	202

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
November	13,067	11,797	309	124	83	22	181
December	9,195	6,798	143	37	71	17	169

Jobseeker's Allowance 2017

Month	Registered	Awarded	Rejected	Revised Deciding Officer Decision	Appeal Allowed	Appeal Partially Allowed	Appeal Disallowed
January	15,888	14,621	186	67	43	17	169
February	10,132	9,014	230	53	69	15	194
March	9,127	9,054	217	39	53	16	139
April	11,748	9,797	198	16	52	14	92

Social Welfare Appeals Waiting Times

176. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will ensure that appeals in respect of various decisions in regard to payments made by his Department are dealt with expeditiously or that payment will continue while the case is on appeal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26246/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The average appeal processing times for all appeals determined from 2015 to date in 2017 broken down by all social welfare scheme types is outlined in the tables.

Appeal processing times are kept under constant scrutiny by the Chief Appeals Officer. The Deputy will be aware that significant effort and resources have been devoted in recent years to reducing the length of the time taken to finalise an appeal and that as a consequence processing times have improved quite considerably.

The overall average processing time, across all schemes, for appeals requiring an oral hearing reduced from 52.5 weeks in 2011 to 25.5 weeks in 2015, 24.1 weeks in 2016 and 24.4 weeks to date in 2017. The overall average time taken to finalise appeals decided by way of a summary decision has also improved in recent years from a peak of 25.1 weeks in 2011 to 18.1 weeks in 2015, 17.6 weeks in 2016 and 18.1 weeks to date in 2017.

The quasi-judicial nature of the appeals system means that there are inevitable time-lags involved. The time taken is proportionate to the complexity of many of the issues under appeal which require a high level of judgement, and the need to ensure due process and natural justice. The system is designed to be flexible and fair and allows for review and submission of further information at all stages which is to the benefit of the appellant.

Where claimants have been refused a payment and are appealing the decision, if their means are insufficient to meet their needs pending the outcome of the appeal, it is open to them to apply for Supplementary Welfare Allowance in the interim. If their application for Supplementary Welfare Allowance is not successful, they can also appeal that decision. Supplementary Welfare Allowance appeals are prioritised for attention within the Social Welfare Appeals Office as soon as the appeal file and submission are received from the Department.

The Chief Appeals Officer has advised me that appeal processing times will continue to be

a priority for her office.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Appeals processing times by scheme 01/01/2015 – 31/12/2015

	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
Blind Person's Pension	21.1	30.7
Carers Allowance	20.6	25.9
Carers Benefit	19.7	21.8
Child Benefit	24.8	34.7
Disability Allowance	15.8	21.4
Illness Benefit	26.3	33.1
Partial Capacity Benefit	25.7	43.4
Domiciliary Care Allowance	21.7	28.7
Deserted Wives Benefit	19.7	26.2
Deserted Wives Allowance	-	16.2
Farm Assist	21.0	28.6
Bereavement Grant	65.7	26.0
Death Benefit (Pension)	-	22.6
Family Income Supplement	19.4	27.7
Invalidity Pension	26.2	28.4
Liable Relatives	22.8	31.2
Maternity Benefit	22.6	17.5
One Parent Family Payment	22.9	33.9
State Pension (Contributory)	26.0	46.0
State Pension (Non-Contributory)	20.4	30.8
State Pension (Transition)	80.1	53.4
Occupational Injury Benefit	20.3	35.0
Disablement Pension	23.7	35.3
Incapacity Supplement	41.2	51.5
Guardian's Payment (Con)	18.2	27.5
Guardian's Payment (Non-Con)	18.7	31.0
Jobseeker's Allowance (Means)	15.8	26.0
Jobseeker's Allowance	15.2	21.9
JA/JB Fraud Control	-	46.1
BTW Family Dividend	14.1	-
Jobseeker's Transitional	12.9	21.3
Recoverable Benefits & Assistance	21.0	30.3
Jobseeker's Benefit	14.3	21.2
Pre-Retirement Allowance	15.0	-
Treatment Benefit	17.9	-
Carer's Support Grant *	21.2	23.6
Insurability of Employment	47.6	69.4
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	13.1	23.5
Survivor's Pension (Con)	24.1	46.6
Survivor's Pension (Non-con)	23.7	38.3
Widows Parent Grant	18.4	-

	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
All Appeals	18.1	25.5

* Previously called Respite Care Grant

	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
Blind Person's Pension	18.2	33.8
Carers Allowance	17.6	21.6
Carers Benefit	20.7	22.4
Child Benefit	22.1	38.2
Disability Allowance	14.6	20.1
Illness Benefit	27.2	34.3
Partial Capacity Benefit	27.3	33.6
Domiciliary Care Allowance	24.3	30.6
Deserted Wives Benefit	13.0	32.8
Farm Assist	21.9	26.0
Bereavement Grant	23.1	-
Death Benefit (Pension)	19.7	-
Liabile Relatives	14.0	16.9
Family Income Supplement	20.4	25.5
Invalidity Pension	21.3	28.2
Maternity Benefit	18.9	21.7
One Parent Family Payment	21.7	31.9
State Pension (Contributory)	25.6	45.9
State Pension (Non-Contributory)	22.7	32.9
State Pension (Transition)	67.7	61.3
Occupational Injury Benefit	25.0	31.9
Disablement Pension	25.8	26.8
Incapacity Supplement	27.7	50.9
Guardian's Payment (Con)	15.8	24.5
Guardian's Payment (Non-Con)	18.4	23.3
Jobseeker's Allowance (Means)	16.7	25.5
Jobseeker's Allowance	16.0	20.9
BTW Family Dividend	21.0	-
Jobseeker's Transitional	19.0	22.3
Recoverable Benefits & Assistance	32.5	31.6
Jobseeker's Benefit	16.0	27.2
Treatment Benefit	17.1	-
Carer's Support Grant *	18.1	23.3
Insurability of Employment	36.6	85.7
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	15.0	24.1
Survivor's Pension (Con)	16.6	28.8
Survivor's Pension (Non-con)	18.4	23.4
Widows Parent Grant	23.5	63.8
All Appeals	17.6	24.1

* Previously called Respite Care Grant

Questions - Written Answers

	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
Blind Person's Pension	16.2	30.1
Carers Allowance	19.6	22.7
Carers Benefit	16.3	21.2
Child Benefit	21.2	26.1
Disability Allowance	15.6	20.9
Illness Benefit	23.4	29.9
Partial Capacity Benefit	40.9	35.4
Domiciliary Care Allowance	23.7	29.9
Deserted Wives Benefit	-	13.7
Farm Assist	21.9	22.1
Bereavement Grant	15.1	-
Death Benefit (Pension)	102.1	-
Family Income Supplement	17.7	34.9
Invalidity Pension	15.2	20.6
Liability Relatives	18.0	24.1
Maternity Benefit	17.6	13.2
One Parent Family Payment	25.9	30.8
State Pension (Contributory)	25.7	36.2
State Pension (Non-Contributory)	22.1	35.0
State Pension (Transition)	-	81.4
Occupational Injury Benefit	14.5	32.4
Disablement Pension	18.2	29.4
Incapacity Supplement	54.2	56.9
Guardian's Payment (Con)	19.1	19.1
Guardian's Payment (Non-Con)	12.9	-
Jobseeker's Allowance (Means)	16.2	24.5
Jobseeker's Allowance	15.5	23.6
BTW Family Dividend	17.6	41.1
Jobseeker's Transitional	15.2	29.4
Recoverable Benefits & Assistance	31.9	-
Jobseeker's Benefit	15.7	18.8
Carer's Support Grant	15.8	23.7
Treatment Benefit	14.0	-
Insurability of Employment	38.1	115.5
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	18.1	24.5
Survivor's Pension (Con)	17.8	21.6
Survivor's Pension (Non-con)	18.2	20.6
Widowed Parent Grant	14.1	-
All Appeals	18.1	24.4

Exceptional Needs Payments

177. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the extent to which community welfare services are readily available to meet the needs of those in society that may ordinarily have had no reason to call on the social services that may, due to circum-

stances outside their control, have to rely on exceptional needs payments to get by in a crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26247/17]

178. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if arrangements can be made to ensure that emergency payments are available in cases in which an emergency exists out of hours or weekends; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26248/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 177 and 178 together.

The Deputy will be aware that my Department has re-engineered its business model to support the provision of integrated services across all business streams involved in the delivery of localised services. As part of this strategy, the Department is engaged in the delivery of integrated Intreo centres, which provide a full range of services, including the Community Welfare Service (CWS), generally available in one location.

People claiming supports under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme generally only interact with the Department on an occasional basis, for example, when seeking an exceptional needs payment or in claiming additional supports such as rent supplement, which are usually reviewed once to twice yearly. The availability of the CWS during normal office hours is therefore sufficient for general day to day requirements.

However, in response to emergency situations such as those caused by severe weather events, local staff are proactive in contacting households affected and in providing targeted supports to those in need as swiftly as possible. This can include the provision of service outside normal office hours and to people that may ordinarily have no reason to engage with these services. The Deputy may be aware that following the recent fire at the Verdumont complex in Blanchardstown, a multi-agency clinic comprising the CWS, Citizens Information and Fingal Council was quickly put in place for people affected. Supports available under my Department's Exceptional Needs Payments (ENPs) and Urgent Needs Payments (UNP) schemes are considered in these circumstances.

I trust this clarifies the arrangements and supports in place.

Youth Unemployment Data

179. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the extent of youth unemployment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26249/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Government policy to reduce unemployment is twofold. First, through policies set out in the Action Plan for Jobs, to create an environment in which business can succeed and create jobs; and second, through Pathways to Work to ensure that as many of these new jobs and other vacancies that arise in our economy are filled by people taken from the Live Register, including young unemployed people.

To date, these policies have been effective in reducing youth unemployment. The Irish youth unemployment rate has fallen from a peak of 31.0% (76,000) in Q2 2012 to 13.7% (24,300) in Q1 2017, bringing this rate from well above the EU average in 2012 to well below the EU average of 17.3% at the latter date (latest Eurostat data available). This places Ireland as one of the best performing Member States in terms of reducing its youth unemployment rate.

These trends indicate that together with improvements in the labour market and economic recovery, our approach to youth employment, which focuses in the first instance on enhancing

processes and policies for assisting young unemployed people to find and secure sustainable jobs, has been relatively successful.

I am confident these measures, and continuing economic recovery, will support further reductions in youth unemployment and add to the substantial improvements that have already been seen over the last few years.

Unemployment Data

180. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the extent of long-term unemployment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26250/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Government policy to reduce unemployment is twofold. First, through policies set out in the Action Plan for Jobs, to create an environment in which business can succeed and create jobs; and second, through Pathways to Work to ensure that as many of these new jobs and other vacancies that arise in our economy are filled by people taken from the Live Register, and in particular the long-term unemployed.

Reflecting the impact of government policy, and the overall improvement in the labour market, the long term unemployment rate has fallen rapidly since it peaked at 9.5% in Q1 2012. The most recent figure is 3.6% in Q1 2017, and a strong downward trend continues.

The *Pathways to Work* 2016-2020 strategy continues to prioritise actions for the long-term unemployed. This includes the payment-by-results services of JobPath to engage more systematically with the long-term unemployed; providing targeted wage subsidies under JobsPlus; and reserved places for long-term unemployed jobseekers on employment and training programmes.

I am confident these measures, and continuing economic recovery, will support further reductions in long-term unemployment and add to the substantial improvements that have already been seen over the last few years.

Social Welfare Benefits

181. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he can ensure the availability of replacement income for those in receipt of one-parent family allowance whose allowance may have been reduced or discontinued but that may not be in a position to go to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26251/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): It is important to note that my Department provides a number of income supports to lone parents. These include the One-Parent Family Payment (OFP) scheme until the youngest child is 7 years of age and the Jobseeker's Transitional Payment (JST) payment where the youngest child is aged 7-13 years. The Jobseeker's Allowance (JA) payment can also be paid to lone parents where the youngest child is aged 14 or over. The Family Income Supplement (FIS) is also available to lone parents who are working 19 or more hours per week.

In most cases entitlement to the OFP payment ends when the youngest child reaches 7 years of age. There are special provisions for those caring, in receipt of Blind Pension or recently bereaved that extend the age of the youngest child beyond 7 years of age. The majority of customers transition to the JST, FIS or JA schemes when their OFP entitlement ends.

Lone parents who are not working outside the home can transition to JST when their OFP ends. These customers do not suffer an income loss when they move to JST as JST is paid at the same rate as OFP. JST is available to lone parents (both former OFP recipients and new lone parents), until the youngest child reaches 14 years of age. JST customers are exempt from the JA conditions that require them to be available for, and genuinely seeking, full-time work. As such, no lone parent with a youngest child aged under 14 years is required to take up employment in order to receive income support from the Department. They can also move into education and/or employment, including into part-time employment, and still receive payment, subject to a means test.

All JST recipients also receive a one to one meeting with a case officer from the Department who assists them to produce a personal development plan and guides them towards appropriate education, and employment opportunities. While the customer is on the JST payment access to these supports are potentially available for up to seven years. This is a much broader support than the 12 month engagement that normally applies for jobseekers from their one to one meeting. The aim of this broader support is to improve the individual's employment prospects.

When the youngest child reaches 14 years of age lone parents can transition to the JA payment. To qualify for this payment a person must be available for and genuinely seeking full-time work. However, lone parents on a JA payment also gain access to the full range of Intreo supports available to assist them into training, education and employment. These income and activation supports combined ensure that there are effective resources available to lone parents.

State Pension (Contributory) Eligibility

182. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if gaps in a person's contribution record in the assessment of entitlement to contributory old age pension, which now may entitle them to a lower level of payment, notwithstanding the fact that they were in insurable employment during a multiplicity of employment of up to five years and in which previously his Department's policy was, that they receive credit for such voids in their payment record on the grounds that contributions should have been returned on their behalf; if this policy has been discontinued; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26252/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Expenditure on pensions, at approximately €7.3 billion, is the largest block of expenditure in my Department, representing some 37% of its expenditure. Demographic change alone will increase this by over €220 million this year. Maintaining the rate of the State pension is critical to protecting older people from poverty.

To ensure that the individual can maximise their entitlement to a State pension (contributory), all contributions paid or credited over their working life from when they first enter insurable employment until pension age are taken into account when assessing their entitlement and the level of that entitlement.

At the moment, to qualify for the State pension (contributory) a person must have at least 520 paid contributions and satisfy a yearly average test (a yearly average of 48 contributions paid and/or credited is required for a maximum rate pension). The yearly average test has been in existence since 1961 when contributory pensions were first introduced. The scheme was designed with a view to ensuring that people could qualify for contributory pensions immediately and to suit a system where social insurance coverage was limited.

The primary purpose of credits is to secure social welfare entitlement of employees by cov-

ering gaps in insurance where they are not in a position to pay PRSI such as during periods of unemployment or illness. Credits do not, on their own, give an individual entitlement to social insurance benefits. However, they may assist insured workers to qualify for them.

If someone believes that their PRSI record is inaccurate and does not have a record of certain contributions which were deducted from their pay, they should contact my Department with evidence, and this will be investigated.

Where someone does not qualify for a full rate contributory pension, they may qualify for an alternative payment. If their spouse has a contributory pension, they may qualify for an Increase for a Qualified Adult amounting up to 90% of a full rate pension. Alternatively, they may qualify for a State pension (non-contributory), which amounts up to 95% of the maximum contributory rate.

It is planned to replace the yearly average approach with a Total Contributions Approach (TCA) for new pensioners from 2020. The aim of this approach is to make the rate of contributory pension more closely match contributions made by a person. Officials of my Department are currently working on the detailed development of the TCA with a view to making proposals for consideration later in the year. An important element in the final design of the scheme will be the position of people who have gaps in their contribution records for various reasons, and this factor is being considered very carefully in developing this reform.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits Data

183. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of young persons under 26 years of age that are in receipt of jobseeker's allowance, jobseeker's benefit and signing for credits for 12 months or more; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26257/17]

184. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of young persons under 26 years of age that are in receipt of jobseeker's allowance, jobseeker's benefit and signing for credits for six months or more by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26258/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 183 and 184 together.

The information requested by the Deputy (as at the end of April) is detailed in the following tables:

Jobseeker's Allowance		
County	6-12 months	12 months and over
Carlow	182	211
Cavan	154	241
Clare	221	237
Cork	557	758
Donegal	466	686
Dublin	1,771	2,464
Galway	352	534
Kerry	256	285

Jobseeker's Allowance		
County	6-12 months	12 months and over
Kildare	272	450
Kilkenny	109	171
Laois	198	322
Leitrim	58	82
Limerick	402	514
Longford	126	170
Louth	361	516
Mayo	271	327
Meath	190	292
Monaghan	84	121
Offaly	192	366
Roscommon	61	130
Sligo	111	127
Tipperary	362	535
Waterford	273	333
Westmeath	239	398
Wexford	410	602
Wicklow	192	305
Totals	7,870	11,177

Jobseeker's Benefit		
County	6-12 months	12 months and over
Carlow	2	-
Cavan	6	-
Clare	9	-
Cork	24	1
Donegal	22	4
Dublin	83	6
Galway	24	3
Kerry	18	-
Kildare	19	5
Kilkenny	3	-
Laois	9	2
Leitrim	4	-
Limerick	18	-
Longford	-	-
Louth	11	4
Mayo	8	1
Meath	7	1
Monaghan	3	1
Offaly	10	-
Roscommon	4	-
Sligo	8	-
Tipperary	14	2
Waterford	16	3
Westmeath	5	2
Wexford	20	3
Wicklow	6	-

Jobseeker's Benefit		
County	6-12 months	12 months and over
Totals	353	38

Jobseeker's Credits Only		
County	6-12 months	12 months and over
Carlow	1	1
Cavan	1	1
Clare	2	0
Cork	4	4
Donegal	3	0
Dublin	12	11
Galway	1	1
Kerry	5	1
Kildare	4	2
Kilkenny		1
Laois	1	2
Leitrim	2	0
Limerick	1	1
Longford		2
Louth	3	0
Mayo	1	0
Meath	2	0
Monaghan	1	1
Offaly	1	1
Roscommon		2
Sligo	1	0
Tipperary	7	3
Waterford	1	3
Westmeath	2	0
Wexford	1	1
Wicklow	5	4
Totals	62	42

Jobseeker's Allowance Data

185. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of young persons under 26 years of age that are in receipt of the €102.70, €147.80 and €193 rate, respectively, of jobseeker's allowance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26259/17]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The information requested by the Deputy is detailed in the following table:

Young persons under the age of 26 in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance at the end of April 2017 by rate.	
Rate	Recipients
€102.70	19,240
€147.80	2,863
€193	4,705
Total	26,808

Visa Agreements

186. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has had discussions with his Australian counterpart or Australian officials regarding the changes to the 457 visa; the implications that this may have on Irish citizens living in or intending to move to Australia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26111/17]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan): While I have not had discussions with my Australian counterpart or Australian officials regarding the changes to Australia's 457 visa changes, officials from my Department, both at headquarters and at Ireland's Embassy in Canberra, are monitoring this closely and are in regular contact with their Australian counterparts on this matter.

Officials at the Embassy met recently with officials at the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection to discuss the changes.

Our Embassy in Canberra and Consulate General in Sydney are also consulting with the Irish advice agencies to whom a lot of our citizens turn for advice in the first instance.

While the 457 visa is due to be discontinued, a replacement temporary skilled visa is being introduced for which Irish citizens will be able to apply. I note that the numbers of Irish availing of the 457 visa has fallen off considerably since the peak in 2012. For Irish citizens who are currently availing of the temporary skilled visa, or are planning on applying, the vast majority of eligible occupations are still likely to be included under the new system.

I am continuing to monitor the situation.

Public Sector Staff Remuneration

187. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the role his officials and, in particular, the economic unit have in the upcoming talks with the public sector unions. [20406/17]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Senior officials from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform are leading the public service pay negotiations from the employer side. These officials are supported by dedicated resources from the Irish Government Economic Evaluation Service (IGEES) which have been assigned to the Remuneration, Industrial Relations and Pensions Division within the Department to provide analytical support to senior management.

Labour Employer Economic Forum

188. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of times the Labour Employer Economic Forum has met; and the issues discussed. [24675/17]

189. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he has attended a Labour Employer Economic Forum meeting recently. [25630/17]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 188 and 189 together.

There have been three meetings of the Labour Employer Economic Forum since it was established in 2016, and I have attended them all, the most recent being on 11 May 2017. The Forum has proved to be a significant addition to the process of direct communication and consultation between Government, employer and employee representatives on matters of mutual interest. Discussions that have taken place in the Forum have been open and constructive and have been conducted in a positive spirit of engagement.

In the first meeting of the Forum we discussed general economic and employment issues in the context of the preparation of Budget 2017 - including the latest growth projections and risks such as Brexit.

Our second meeting focused on Brexit in more detail and the potential impacts on employer and labour interests in the Irish economy.

This month we had the third meeting of the Forum where there was a dedicated discussion, led by my colleague the Minister for Social Protection, Leo Varadkar, T.D., on proposed measures to increase protections for members of defined benefit occupational pension schemes in the private sector and related issues.

Garda Station Refurbishment

190. **Deputy Tom Neville** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 182 of 17 May 2017, the timeframe for works to be carried out; and when a design team will be appointed. [26158/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Seán Canney): The refurbishment and upgrade of Newcastlewest Garda Station is included in the Capital Investment Plan 2016-2021, launched in October 2015 for An Garda Síochána. The Office of Public Works is currently progressing the delivery of all the projects listed in that plan.

OPW has received a Brief of requirements for a District Headquarter Station in Newcastlewest from An Garda Síochána and has carried out a feasibility study. OPW is currently progressing the appointment of a design team in order to further advance this project. Construction works are expected to take approximately 18 months.

Question Heading for question(s) 191

191. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the OPW; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26233/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Seán Canney): The letter referred to by the Deputy was sent to my constituency office in January of this year. I am advised that an email issued from the Office of Public Works Property Division to Mr. Halpin on 8 February in relation to this matter.

I am advised that no legal agreements have been entered into by the Office of Public Works with either the bank or the receiver in this case. This matter is currently being given attention by the Chief State Solicitor's Office and, until clarification is received on certain legal matters, payment of rent on this property is currently on hold.

Heritage Projects

192. **Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if her Department has given assistance to communities or groups in the past to restore derelict mill sites to running order; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26081/17]

Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Financial support is provided by my Department through a number of structured schemes for the conservation and protection of heritage buildings, including mills.

The Built Heritage Investment Scheme is a scheme for the repair and conservation of structures on the local authority Record of Protected Structures. I recently announced over five hundred projects across the country that will be supported by the scheme in 2017, which will create employment in the conservation and construction industries, while helping to regenerate urban and rural areas.

The Structures at Risk Fund enables conservation works to heritage structures which are deemed to be at significant risk of deterioration. Structures must be on the local authority Record of Protected Structures. The fund, administered through the local authorities, seeks to encourage the regeneration and reuse of heritage properties and to help to secure the preservation of protected structures which might otherwise be lost. I recently announced 67 projects countrywide that will be supported under the Structures at Risk Fund for 2017.

Support under these schemes has been provided for a number of mill projects each year for the past number of years. Details of successful projects under the schemes are available on my Department's website at www.dahrrga.gov.ie.

While the closing dates for both of the above schemes have now passed for 2017, my Department will work closely with the local authorities throughout the year in order to ensure that the best possible use is made of all funds within the schemes, including by reallocating funds where necessary when projects do not proceed within agreed timeframes. The circulars setting out the terms and conditions of the schemes are available on all local authority websites, and on my Department's website. Any enquiries should be directed to the relevant local authority.

The Heritage Council, which my Department funds, also provides grants for the protection and preservation of the built heritage. It is primarily a matter for the Heritage Council to decide how its funding should be allocated across the range of research, education and conservation programmes it supports annually, having regard to competing priorities for limited resources. Grant schemes for 2017 are advertised by the Heritage Council on its website www.heritage-council.ie.

Heritage Projects

193. **Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs her plans for carrying out improvement works at a site (details supplied); if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the cemetery is closed to the public due to concerns of debris and subsiding wall stead; if her attention has been further drawn to the fact an application was made for heritage grant funding but was unsuccessful and that therefore no funding opportunity currently exists for repairs other than from her Department directly; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26114/17]

Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the site in question is owned and managed by the local authority the carrying out of any works to the structure would primarily be a matter for Donegal County Council itself.

In excess of 1000 national monuments at over 700 locations are in direct State care, including notable sites in County Donegal such as Donegal Castle, Doe Castle and Grianan of Aileach. Significant resources are required to properly manage and maintain these monuments and, as a consequence, I regret that my Department is not in a position to take responsibility for the maintenance of the Abbey.

Financial support is provided by my Department through a number of structured schemes for the conservation and protection of heritage buildings, including the Built Heritage Investment Scheme, the Structures at Risk Fund and other initiatives operated by the Heritage Council.

The Built Heritage Investment Scheme is a scheme for the repair and conservation of protected structures (i.e. structures on the local authority Record of Protected Structures). I recently announced over five hundred projects across the country that will be supported by the scheme in 2017 which will create employment in the conservation and construction industries, while helping to regenerate urban and rural areas.

The Structures at Risk Fund enables conservation works to heritage structures in both private and public ownership, which are protected under the Planning and Development Acts and are deemed to be at significant risk of deterioration. Structures must be on the local authority Record of Protected Structures. The fund, administered through the local authorities, seeks to encourage the regeneration and reuse of heritage properties and to help to secure the preservation of protected structures which might otherwise be lost. I recently announced 67 projects countrywide that will be supported under the Structures at Risk Fund for 2017.

While the closing dates for both of the above schemes have now passed, my Department works closely with the local authorities throughout the year in order to ensure that the best possible use is made of all funds within the schemes, including by reallocating funds where necessary when projects do not proceed within agreed timeframes. I am advised that an application was received for funding for this project under the BHIS 2017 but did not form part of the original list of projects forwarded by the local authority to the Department for approval. The project is on a reserve list and should further additional funding become available during the course of this year as a result of other projects in that local authority or elsewhere not proceeding, it will be open to the local authority to reallocate funding to this project, subject to the usual terms and conditions attaching to the scheme.

Circulars setting out the terms and conditions of these schemes are available on all local authority websites, and on my Department's website. Any enquiries about the operation of the schemes should be directed to the relevant local authority.

The Heritage Council, which my Department funds, also provides grants for the protection and preservation of the built heritage. It is primarily a matter for the Heritage Council to decide how its funding should be allocated across the range of research, education and conservation programmes it supports annually, having regard to competing priorities for limited resources. Grant schemes for 2017 are advertised by the Heritage Council on its website www.heritage-council.ie.

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

194. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs when a scheme of financial assistance and tax incentives will be introduced to assist in the upgrading of single rural houses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26223/17]

Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As part of the Government's Action Plan for Rural Development, I launched an enhanced Town and Village Renewal Scheme on 13 April last. This Scheme will focus on improving the economic development of our rural towns and villages.

Funding of €20 million has been made available under the scheme, which will support up to 300 towns and villages over the next 15 months.

I plan to launch a separate pilot scheme later this year to encourage residential occupancy in rural towns and villages. The scheme will be aimed at owner-occupiers and will examine ways in which properties that are currently not in use in town and village centres can be restored or renovated to allow them to be used for residential purposes. The pilot will not apply to houses in rural areas outside of towns and villages.

Details of the scheme are being finalised in consultation with relevant Departments and full particulars will be announced when the pilot scheme is launched later in the year.

Public Sector Staff Remuneration

195. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Health when staff in section 38 organisations will receive pay restoration under the Lansdowne Road Agreement and specifically the €1,000 annual increase which has not begun to be paid in an organisation (details supplied). [26215/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Adjustments to the salaries of public health sector employees as provided for by the Lansdowne Road Agreement are effective from 1 April 2017. As this question refers to organisations funded by the HSE under section 38 of the Health Act 2004, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to you on this matter.

HSE Expenditure

196. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of a 2% increase in the HSE IT budget to bring it to the EU average; and the overall new total cost including the 2% increase [26062/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): HSE spending on ICT is composed of both Capital and Revenue expenditure. The projected spend on ICT by HSE in 2017 is €55.0m capital and a revenue figure €121.0m approximately giving a total estimated figure for ICT spend of €176.0m. Based on a current gross total vote figure for HSE in 2017 of €14.6bn approximately, an increase in the HSE ICT budget, sufficient to achieve 2% of the total vote, would require an ICT investment figure of €292.0 m per annum. On this basis, HSE ICT expenditure would need to increase by €116.0m to reach 2% of total health expenditure. A mid-term capital review is currently underway by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for completion in the autumn and the ICT capital component will be examined in that context.

Electronic Health Records

197. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the cost of rolling out the eHealth electronic health record over the periods of two months, 18 months, 24 months, 30 months and 36 months, respectively [26063/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE have developed a business case for the implementation of an electronic health care record (EHR) in Ireland. The business case sets out a number of investment scenarios including timescales for implementation and roll out. In the business case, a 5 year and a 9 year technology investment programme is developed but there is flexibility within its scope to stretch out timescales further. The total of all estimated costs including business change elements for a 5 year implementation are in the range of €647m to €875m respectively and the 9 year figure is between €609m-€824m. The five year scenario could be considered a 'fast track' approach. These costs would only arise if full implementation in all sites were to take place. The costs have been estimated based on market engagements in 2015/16.

A technology and business change project of this scale and scope has a number of inherent risks. Realistic timescales are important to ensure that the adoption of both the technology and the business change required by front line staff can be absorbed and managed in a coherent way. In addition to resourcing the EHR project with substantial manpower and financial resources, experience from other countries demonstrates that the vendor markets supplying many of these services needs to be carefully managed in terms of capacity and capability to deliver working tailored solutions in a satisfactory manner. My Department is currently evaluating how this might be progressed particularly in delivering an EHR in the context of the work being planned for the New Children's Hospital which aspires to be the first digital hospital facility in the country. In developing a national electronic health record programme we must build on the progress to date in ICT deployment but also on the lessons learnt from other jurisdictions in developing an optimum solution for Ireland. The business case highlights a number of optional timescales and investment approaches which will need to be considered. The scale of the task in implementing an electronic health record programme is very large and requires a complex procurement and approval process. It is a five to ten year programme of work depending on the scale of resources deployed.

Question Heading for question(s) 198

198. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of funding and implementing the national maternity strategy; and if he will provide a breakdown of the spending costs [26064/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Ireland's first National Maternity Strategy - *Creating A Better Future Together 2016 - 2026* - will be implemented on a phased basis. Implementation will be led by the newly established National Women & Infants Health Programme. The Programme is drawing up a detailed action plan to inform this process; this work is expected to be completed by end June and includes the identification of both capital and revenue funding requirements, which will in turn inform the annual Estimates process over the lifetime of the Strategy.

€3 million development funding provided for maternity services in 2016 was allocated in line with the Strategy, and included funding for additional staff, including 100 midwives, the development of specialist bereavement teams and for the implementation of the Maternal and

Newborn Clinical Management System. Increased funding of €6.8m has been provided for maternity services in 2017 which will allow for the continued implementation of the Strategy.

Dental Services

199. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of increasing funding to the public dental service to bring it to a position to which it can deliver its remit in full. [26065/17]

200. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of introducing free dental care for the general population. [26066/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 199 and 200 together.

Dental services for children up to 16 years of age and persons of all ages with special needs are provided by the Public Dental Service of the HSE through its dental clinics. This includes emergency services and referral as appropriate to children under 6. A targeted fissure sealant programme is provided for children aged 6 to 8 and 11 to 13 (usually 2nd and 6th class in primary school). In addition, a screening programme is provided for these age groups with necessary interventions for permanent teeth including fillings and extractions. Children aged 9-11 may receive a screening and necessary interventions where resources allow. The provision of these dental services is in line with the Dental Health Action Plan, published in 1994. Annual expenditure on the Public Dental Service has been approximately €60 million in recent years. A breakdown by year was provided to the Deputy in response to a Parliamentary Question (Ref. 15138/16) on 7 June 2016.

The Dental Treatment Service Scheme provides access to dental treatment for medical card holders over the age of 16. All medical card holders are entitled to specific dental treatments, including an annual dental examination. Last year almost 1.2 million treatments were provided to over 460,000 patients at a cost of €63.2 million.

The Dental Treatment Benefit Scheme, for which the Minister for Social Protection is responsible, provides an annual dental examination to insured workers and retired people who have the required number of PRSI contributions. It has recently been further extended to some 450,000 self-employed people and their dependent spouses for the first time. Later this year some of the most popular treatment benefits available through PRSI, including scale and polish, will also be restored.

The cost of increasing the level of service provided by the HSE or introducing of free dental care for the general population would depend on a number of factors, including the underlying oral health of the population, the way in which such a service would be provided, the level of service that would be provided, and the likely level of take-up of such services. Therefore it is not possible to provide the estimated cost as requested. The National Oral Health Policy which is being led by the Chief Dental Officer in the Department will inform future provision of dental services. It will take account of commitments in the Programme for Government and have regard to the funding available to facilitate such measures.

General Practitioner Data

201. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of the roll-

out of free general practitioner care for all children under 12 years of age. [26067/17]

202. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of the roll-out of free general practitioner care for all children under 18 years of age. [26068/17]

203. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of the roll-out of free general practitioner care to the general population. [26069/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 201 to 203, inclusive, together.

The cost of GP visit and medical cards varies significantly with the age of the cardholder. The following table outlines the current indicative annual cost for medical card eligibility and GP visit card eligibility, by age groups:

Age Groups	Indicative Annual Cost per Card	
	GP Visit Card	Medical Card
0 – 4 Yrs	€235	€366
5 – 15 Yrs	€161	€218
16 - 44 Yrs	€147	€596
45 – 64 Yrs	€215	€1,242
65 – 69 Yrs	€237	€1,627
Aged 70 and over	€485	€2,128

Note: Data is compiled by the HSE Primary Care Reimbursement Service, based on available information to August 2016 and by extrapolation to full year costs.

The extension of free GP care to all citizens not currently covered by medical or GP visit card would encompass a further 2.6 million people approximately.

The Deputy will be aware of the ongoing review of the GMS and other publicly funded contracts involving GPs, and that the next phase of discussions to progress this work is underway. Initial engagement with GP representative bodies began in January. As with any negotiation-type process, and given the range and complexity of the issues to be discussed, the engagement may take some time.

The estimated cost of extending free GP care to all citizens, or specific cohorts of the population, will vary depending on the outcome of these negotiations and any implications they may have for the future scope and content of the general practitioner service, and the relevant fees and payments to GPs.

The Deputy will be aware that the Report of the Committee on the Future of Healthcare which was published on 30 May 2017 recommended the phased introduction of universal GP care over the next five years. The Report which will be debated in the Dáil in mid-June is currently being considered by my Department.

Medical Card Expenditure

204. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of awarding medical cards for all adults with disabilities. [26070/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): In accordance with the provision of the Health Act 1970 (as amended), eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE. The Act

obliges the HSE to assess whether a person is unable, without due hardship, to arrange general practitioner services for himself or herself and his or her family, having regard to his or her overall financial position and reasonable expenditure and every application must be assessed on that basis.

Under the legislation having a particular illness or disability in itself, does not establish eligibility for a medical card and therefore, the medical conditions of applicants for this scheme are not monitored on that basis. Where the applicant's income is within the income guidelines, a medical card or GP visit card will be awarded. If a person's only income is a means tested Social Welfare Allowance, for example, a Disability Allowance, he/she will qualify for a Medical Card.

In certain circumstances the HSE may exercise discretion and grant a medical card even though an application exceeds his or her income threshold where he or she faces difficult circumstances, such as extra costs arising from an illness or disability.

The Deputy may be aware of the *Report of the Expert Panel on Medical Need for Medical Card Eligibility*, which was published in 2014. It made a recommendation that a person's means should remain the main qualifier for a medical card and also recommended that it is neither feasible nor desirable to list conditions in priority order for medical card eligibility.

With regard to the cost of awarding a medical cards to all adults with disabilities, detailed financial analysis would need to be conducted in order to establish as accurately as possible the expected costs to the Exchequer and this information is not readily available to the HSE.

Ambulance Service Data

205. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of the retention of the delivery of Dublin's ambulance service with the Dublin Fire Brigade. [26071/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Dublin Fire Brigade (DFB) provide emergency ambulance services in Dublin city and county, by arrangement between Dublin City Council and the HSE. The HSE National Ambulance Service (NAS) provides some emergency capacity in the greater Dublin area, as well as non-emergency patient transport.

I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly with information on the costs associated with this arrangement.

Health Services Provision

206. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE has plans to extend and improve the services available at a facility (details supplied) in County Cork; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there is a waiting list for persons seeking access to the service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26077/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Helen McEntee): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

General Practitioner Contracts

207. **Deputy Declan Breathnach** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 136 of 13 October 2016 and 159 of 18 May 2016, if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the HSE has stated after complaining to it (details supplied) and applying for a reimbursement of charges for blood testing that there is a loophole in the system whereby general practitioners have been advised by the IMO that they can charge for blood tests that are for monitoring purposes, that is, repeat bloods for an ongoing medical condition; if he will make arrangements to immediately close this loophole; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26095/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): There is no provision under the GP GMS contract for persons who hold a medical card or GP visit card to be charged for routine phlebotomy services provided by their GP, or the Practice Nurse on behalf of the GP, which are required to either assist in the diagnosis of illness or the treatment of a condition. The HSE has advised GPs that where a blood test forms part of the investigation or necessary treatment of a patient's symptoms or conditions, this should be free of charge for patients who hold a medical card or GP visit card.

My Department and the HSE's position has consistently been that routine investigations or tests are comprehended by the provisions of clause 11 of the GMS contract which outlines the duties of GPs under the GMS scheme. In circumstances where particular tests are necessary to either (a) diagnose a patient or (b) monitor a diagnosed condition, the GP should not be charging eligible patients. However, GP representative bodies are not in agreement with this position and it has become apparent that some GPs are charging GMS patients for these services.

In order to achieve clarity on this issue, I have asked that any difference of perspective in relation to the provision of phlebotomy services be addressed in the ongoing GP contractual review. I am pleased that engagement with GP representative bodies to progress this process commenced in January and I look forward to constructive and positive further engagements.

Medical Aids and Appliances Provision

208. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied) from County Louth whose consultant has requested that they be provided with a glucometer scanner in order that they would no longer have to prick their fingers for glucose readings; if he will provide this equipment to this person; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26096/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the HSE for reply to the Deputy.

Disability Services Provision

209. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the closure of a care home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26107/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives. This commitment is outlined in the Programme for Partnership Government,

which is guided by two principles: equality of opportunity and improving the quality of life for people with disabilities.

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.

Vaccination Programme

210. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Health his views on reports that some persons that receive the HPV Gardasil vaccine are reporting serious side effects; his further views on the number of girls withdrawing from the vaccine programme; and if he will commission a study into these reported cases [26109/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Each year in Ireland around 300 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer. The HPV vaccine protects against two high risk types of HPV that cause 73% of all cervical cancers.

There is scientific evidence of the beneficial impact of HPV vaccine for women's health in countries that have had high vaccine uptake rates. Cases of high grade pre-cancerous changes of the cervix have reduced by 75% in Australia and by more than 50% in Denmark and Scotland.

The Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) is responsible for monitoring the safety and quality of all medicines that are licensed in Ireland. While no medicine is entirely without risk, the safety of vaccines, as with all medicines, is carefully monitored and any new evidence concerning side-effects is taken into account. The HPRA and the European Medicines Agency continually monitor adverse events to vaccination.

Unfounded, false claims have been made of an association between HPV vaccination and a number of conditions experienced by a group of young women. It appears that they first suffered symptoms around the time they received the HPV vaccine and a false connection is being made between the HPV vaccine and the onset of these symptoms. There is no scientific evidence that the HPV vaccine causes any long term illness. The misinformation around the HPV vaccine has led to a significant drop in uptake rates of the HPV vaccine. The Irish Cancer Society state that, based on national cancer statistics, the drop in the rate of uptake to 50% for the 2016-2017 academic year will have the following alarming consequences:

- The death of at least 40 girls with cervical cancer who did not receive the HPV vaccine;
- A further 100 girls will develop cervical cancer and will require life altering treatment; and
- An additional 1000 girls will require invasive therapy to prevent the precancerous form of HPV.

Misinformation is causing real harm to those unvaccinated children and adults who develop vaccine preventable diseases, and to people who seek inappropriate treatments for real conditions that are not caused by vaccines. Any parent who has doubts or questions about vaccination should talk to their family doctor, or alternatively to visit the National Immunisation office website. These sources of information are clear and accurate and will answer any queries you may have about the benefits or risks of vaccination. Vaccination is the best way for parents to make sure their children are healthy and protected from preventable diseases.

I have no plans to commission a study along the lines suggested in the Parliamentary Ques-

tion as the safety and efficacy of these vaccines continues to be monitored by regulatory agencies at both national and European level.

Hospital Appointments Status

211. **Deputy Timmy Dooley** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26112/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): 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.

Commencement of Legislation

212. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Health the provisions of the Nurses and Midwives Act 2011 that have not yet been commenced; and the date on which he expects them to be commenced. [26113/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Nurses and Midwives Act 2011 is a comprehensive piece of legislation which is being commenced on a gradual basis. The following are the provisions of the 2011 Act which have yet to be commenced:

Section 4(2);

Section 9(2)(g)(ii);

Section 37(2)(a);

Sections 39, 40, 41, 44, 45;

Section 59(1)(b) re professional competence;

Section 59(2)(d);

Section 65(1)(b);

Section 84;

Sections 87 – 91;

Section 102(2), (3), (5); and

Section 103.

No dates have been set for the commencement of these sections.

Nursing Staff Recruitment

213. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Health the way in which hospitals in the Cork city area are addressing the nursing recruitment shortages; the countries they have recruited nurses from; the way in which this recruitment is being funded; the person that is travelling to recruit nurses; the cost of each recruitment campaign abroad for Cork city hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26117/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter.

Nursing Staff Recruitment

214. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Health the adaption programmes that are undertaken for nurses that are recruited from abroad; the length and cost of these programmes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26118/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service matter I have referred the question to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland

215. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Health if he or his Department receive regular updates from the Nursing and Midwifery Board regarding the number of nurses that apply to go abroad to work each year; his views on same; the specific actions he and the HSE are taking to prevent this in the short, medium and long term; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26119/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I can confirm that the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI) do not routinely provided updates to the Department on an ongoing basis. However, the NMBI have provided information on the number of Certificates of Current Professional Status (CCPS) issued as and when requested. In this regard, a total of 1,059 nurses and midwives requested such certificates from January 2016 – December 2016 - the top 5 countries for such certificates and the associated number of certificates issued is set out below:

- 421 Australia;
- 381 United Kingdom;
- 91 USA;
- 45 Canada;
- 20 New Zealand.

It should be noted that nurses and midwives request this Certificate when they are intending to work abroad. However, it should be noted that nurses and midwives who receive this Certificate do not in all cases actually travel abroad - some of them may for a variety of reasons decide to stay in Ireland instead of travelling.

With regard to the second part of your question, I would like to advise the Deputy that under proposals agreed at the WRC between this Department, DPER, the HSE, the INMO and SIPTU

management have committed to increases in the HSE's National Workforce Plan for nurses and midwives in 2017. Management are to increase the nursing and midwifery workforce in 2017, through a broad range of initiatives that will result in the delivery of 1,208 additional permanent posts; including the conversion of agency employed staff into HSE direct employees, and offering all graduating nurses and midwives full time contracts.

Other key measures agreed include improved maternity leave cover; a career break scheme; 130 additional undergraduate places in 2017; and offering nurses and midwives improved educational opportunities and career pathways which will support recruitment and retention in the medium and long term.

A Section 10 Direction was placed before the Houses of Oireachtas in respect of the agreement. The HSE will have to report to the Minister for Health on the performance and implementation of these arrangements as part of the 2017 National Service Plan. The HSE will also have to provide special reports by June, September and December 2017 on the recruitment of the posts provided in the workforce plan.

A HSE Circular has issued that allows delegation of recruitment to Directors of Nursing. A High Level Group with an independent chair has been established to oversee implementation of this agreement.

The above is in addition to the many other initiatives currently underway to improve nursing and midwifery staffing levels throughout the country. The number of nursing and midwifery staff increased by 113 WTEs from the end of March to the end of April and by 714 WTEs since the end of 2016. Overall nursing WTEs are at the highest levels since 2011 with numbers increasing since 2015 notwithstanding intense global competition for our nurses and midwives.

Hospitals Car Park Charges

216. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide free parking for patients and close family of patients that are suffering with a prolonged or serious illness which requires regular hospital visits; and the details of existing schemes for this or hospitals in which free parking is available [26121/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): There is a significant demand for car parking at all hospitals. Consequently, the efficient management of parking spaces and traffic flow on hospital campuses is of crucial importance. This is to ensure on-going availability of parking spaces; free flow of traffic on campus; unobstructed access for emergency vehicles at all times; proper use of spaces designated for drivers with disabled permits; and proper use of spaces designated as drop off points near the hospital entrance.

The HSE (Health Service Executive) has advised that it does not have one single contract to provide parking services at all hospitals. Instead each hospital has a unique arrangement which reflects its specific circumstances.

Arrangements for car parking generally is an operational matter for the HSE. The HSE has advised that it does not provide guidelines on hospital parking and each hospital/hospital group implements their own guidelines.

Hospitals which charge parking fees are very cognisant of the financial implications of parking costs for patients and their families particularly those with long-term illnesses. Consequently, a maximum daily fixed parking charge has been introduced in some hospitals, thus capping this expense. I understand that some hospitals also provide reduced rate parking rates

for long-term patients and visitors for whom the payment of the full rate would cause hardship. The HSE has advised me that it keeps hospital parking charges under review.

In response to the particular queries raised, as these are service matters, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

Mental Health Services Provision

217. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive psychological cognitive behaviour therapy. [26126/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Helen McEntee): As this is a service issue, this question has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Ambulance Service

218. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the terms of reference for the review of ambulance services; the timeframe for the completion of the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26145/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I understand the review referred to by the Deputy is the review of public and private ambulance service provision which has been commissioned by the HSE. The purpose of this review is to assess the costs of both public and private ambulance services, ascertain the appropriate use of those services, and define clearly the parameters for use of public and private providers.

I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy with any further information which might be available.

Health Services Provision

219. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health when requested supports for a person (details supplied) will be issued; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26146/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the HSE for reply to the Deputy.

Home Help Service Data

220. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health the number of home help hours by local health area provided in March and April 2017 in tabular form. [26148/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Helen McEntee): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

Disability Services Provision

221. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Health if funding has been

secured to initiate the moving of residents into a newly constructed group home due for completion in May 2017 for persons with physical and sensory disabilities in Carrickmacross, County Monaghan; if not, when the funding will be secured in order that persons will be able to move into the development; if it will be the HSE that will manage the group home once opened; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26149/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives. This commitment is outlined in the Programme for Partnership Government, which is guided by two principles: equality of opportunity and improving the quality of life for people with disabilities.

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.

Medical Card Applications

222. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if a full medical card will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); when same will occur; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26155/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): 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 Health Service Executive has been asked to examine this matter and to reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Patient Data

223. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health if the national patient experience survey includes patients in accident and emergency departments. [26157/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The National Patient Experience Survey commenced on 1 May 2017. The survey includes all adult patients who have been admitted as an in-patient and discharged during the month of May 2017. In order to be eligible, the patient must have spent 24 hours or more in a public acute hospital and have a postal address in the Republic of Ireland. Those admitted through the Emergency Department and who have spent 24 hours in the hospital will also be included.

The questions in the survey include a focus on the patient's admission to hospital, the ward environment, the care and treatment received and any interactions with staff. There are also 6 questions in the survey which relate specifically to the patient's experience in the Emergency Department.

The survey will identify areas for improvement and as such will provide a direct focus for any changes required. It is anticipated that the survey will also discover many examples of good practice which in turn can be shared across the country. Capturing these important mes-

sages is vital for patients, hospital managers and not least for the staff providing the care in our hospitals.

The National Patient Experience Survey is a joined-up approach between the Department, the HSE and HIQA and is a concrete sign of the commitment of policy makers, service providers and regulators to improve the quality and the safety of our health services for patients. My Department is fully committed to promoting patient safety and to this end I launched a new National Patient Safety Office last year, which is currently pursuing a programme of patient safety policy and legislation.

Hospital Appointments Status

224. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 561 of 4 April 2017, the position regarding this matter; if the person (details supplied) is on a waiting list; if so, the position on same; if he will provide a timeframe from their appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26160/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I am advised that the individual attended a diabetic retinal appointment on 22 May 2017 at the Mater Misericordiae Hospital.

Hospital Appointments Status

225. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26165/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): 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.

Hospital Waiting Lists

226. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Health the number of children waiting to see a rheumatology consultant; and the average timeframe for waiting, by county, in each of the years 2014 to 2016 in tabular form. [26187/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): In relation to the query raised by the Deputy, as this is a service issue, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

HSE Staff Data

227. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Health the number of consultant rheu-

matologists, clinical nurse specialists, advanced nurse practitioners, physiotherapists and occupational therapists that specialise in children's arthritis that are employed by the HSE (details supplied); and the CHO in which they are based in each of the years 2011 to 2016 in tabular form. [26188/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): In relation to the queries raised by the Deputy, as these are service issues, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

HSE Staff

228. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 238 of 25 January 2017 and 59 of 3 May 2017 (details supplied), the reason for the delay in granting approval for such an essential post in view of the fact it has now been vacant since August 2016 leaving the Gaeltacht area bereft of the service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26189/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply.

Registration of Deaths

229. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if, in the recording of deaths in which synthetic opiates are used and in which sudden encephalopathy occurs, that is recorded as the cause of death or if the underlying condition is recorded; the guidance provided by the HSE in that context; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26190/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): The administration of the registration system, including the registration of deaths, is a matter for An tÁrd-Chláraitheoir (the Registrar-General of Births, Deaths and Marriages) and for local Registrars who operate under his general direction. The details to be registered in relation to a death are set out in section 30 of the Births and Deaths Registration (Ireland) Act of 1863 and the schedule to that Act. These include date and place of death, name and age of the deceased, occupation and cause of death. Certified copies of entries in the register of deaths (death certificates) include all details contained in the relevant entry in the register of deaths.

Under the Coroners Act 1962, a Coroner is an independent office holder with responsibility under the law for the medico-legal investigation of the circumstances of sudden, unexplained, violent and unnatural deaths. Any evidence provided by the HSE would be taken into account by the Coroner as appropriate if the death went to inquest. The Coroner decides on the cause of death including any other significant underlying conditions.

The Deputy may also be aware that the National Drug-Related Deaths Index (NDRDI), administered by the Health Research Board, reports on deaths due to poisoning (overdose) by alcohol and/or other drugs, and deaths among drug users (non-poisoning). Deaths are calculated from four sources:

- Coroners' records;
- the Hospital In-patient Enquiry Scheme;
- the Central Treatment List; and

- the General Mortality Register.

Service Level Agreements

230. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if an equality of service consideration is made when service level agreements are entered into in the context of allocation of funds to organisations delivering services to persons with intellectual disabilities; if such criteria are published; the reason service provision varies widely between organisations (details supplied) in the provision of transport and recreation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26191/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives. This commitment is outlined in the Programme for Partnership Government, which is guided by two principles: equality of opportunity and improving the quality of life for people with disabilities.

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.

Medicinal Products Availability

231. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Health if he will direct the HSE to provide lifesaving medication to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26192/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of licensed medicines, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The Act specifies the criteria to be applied in decisions on the reimbursement of medicines.

In line with the 2013 Act, if a Company would like a medicine to be reimbursed by the HSE pursuant to the Community Drug Schemes or as a hospital medicine, the Company must first submit an application to the HSE to have the new medicine added to the Reimbursement List or to be priced as a hospital medicine.

It is a pre-requisite that any new medicine applying to be reimbursed by the HSE must first hold a marketing authorisation granted by the Health Products Regulatory Authority ("the HPRA") or the European Medicine Agency.

Pembrolizumab is not licensed for the treatment of metastatic colorectal cancer. The unlicensed use of medicines is a matter for a patient's clinician and the treating facility.

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.

Hospitals Expenditure

232. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health when his attention was drawn to the fact that Tallaght hospital had cut its cleaning budget in 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26217/17]

233. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health the steps he will take regarding the decision to cut Tallaght hospital's cleaning budget in 2015; if the persons that made the decision still hold positions of responsibility in the hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26218/17]

234. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health if the decision to cut Tallaght hospital's cleaning budget in 2015 was sanctioned by the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26219/17]

235. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health if the decision to cut Tallaght hospital's cleaning budget in 2015 was sanctioned by the board of the Dublin Midlands hospital group; if their attention was drawn to it; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26220/17]

236. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health if other hospitals have imposed reductions on cleaning and hygiene similar to Tallaght hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26221/17]

237. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health the cleaning budget for Tallaght hospital in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017, respectively; and the amount it has increased in order to treat the adverse consequences of the previous decision to cut the budget. [26222/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 232 to 237, inclusive, together.

In relation to the queries raised by the Deputy, as these are service issues, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

Occupational Therapy

238. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the estimated waiting time for a person (details supplied) to seek an appointment with an occupational therapist in a health centre; his views on whether this waiting time is satisfactory in view of this person's health concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26224/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply.

Hospital Services

239. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding a service (details supplied) in a hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26229/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): In response to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

Hospital Appointments Status

240. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appointment for a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26232/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): 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.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

Dental Services Provision

241. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Health when an appointment will be made for the provision of a dental surgeon to the health centre in Bagenalstown to provide services to persons in the vicinity rather than travelling to counties Kilkenny or Carlow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26240/17]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the HSE for reply to the Deputy.

Brexit Issues

242. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he or his officials have met with the IFA or exporters associations to discuss the serious concerns they have regarding Brexit. [25946/17]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Close consultations in relation to the potential impact of the UK decision to leave the EU have been ongoing with all of the relevant stakeholders - including the IFA and other farming organisations as well as industry stakeholders - since early 2016, considerably in advance of the UK referendum which gave rise to the decision to leave the EU.

I and my officials have consulted extensively with representative organisations, businesses and other stakeholders, both formally through mechanisms such as my Department's Stakeholder Consultative Committee (which met most recently on 11 April 2017) and the series of agrifood sectoral dialogues that I have hosted under the All-Island Civic Dialogue process (most recently on 3 May 2017), and also informally through ongoing and regular bilateral contacts.

We will continue to meet representative bodies in these and other fora in order to exchange views, to monitor developments and to discuss appropriate responses as the negotiations progress.

Bioenergy Willow Scheme

243. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the

number of applications that have been made to the bioenergy willow scheme 2005; the number of persons that received funding; and the number of bodies his department has listed that are using the crop for bioenergy, in tabular form. [26089/17]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The number of applications received for the Bio-Energy Willow Scheme 2015 was low with four applications received in total. The approved sites have been inspected by the Department and the applications for the establishment grant are being processed. The Terms and Conditions of the Scheme required that applicants indicate the end user which in the case of all applications was the same body.

Basic Payment Scheme

244. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the discussions which have taken place between his Department and the EU authorities regarding the arrangements for the basic payment scheme post-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26116/17]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The future of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is of huge importance to Ireland's agriculture sector and is a key strategic priority for my Department. I have met with Commissioner Hogan to discuss a number of key issues including the Basic Payment Scheme post 2020. In addition, officials from my Department continue to actively engage in various EU committees and working groups on this issue and my Department will continue to take a lead role at EU level in the development of the CAP post 2020.

GLAS Payments

245. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason a person (details supplied) has not received a 2016 GLAS payment; when payment will be received; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26156/17]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The person named was approved into GLAS 1 with a contract commencement date of 1 October 2015 and has received full entitlements in respect of the 2015 scheme year.

The 2016 prepayment checking established that the interim commonage form issued to the person named had not been signed and returned as required to support payment. This form has now re-issued to the assigned Commonage Advisor and when it is completed and returned by the person named the application will be further processed for payment.

National Broadband Plan Implementation

246. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the details of the plans for a broadband service upgrade at Ballinamuck, County Longford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26078/17]

248. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if Bree, County Wexford is part of the Government's national broadband plan; when it will be rolled out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26153/17]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten): I propose to take Questions Nos. 246 and 248 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) aims to deliver high speed broadband services to every city, town, village and individual premises in Ireland. The Programme for Government commits to the delivery of the NBP as a matter of priority. This is being achieved through a combination of commercial investment by the telecommunications sector and a State Intervention in those areas where commercial investment has not been fully demonstrated.

A key principle of the NBP is to support and stimulate commercial investment through policy and regulatory measures. Since the publication of the NBP in 2012, commercial investment has been considerable. To date, the commercial telecommunications sector has invested over €2.5bn in upgrading and modernising networks which support the provision of high speed broadband and mobile telecoms services.

There has been significant progress in relation to broadband roll-out so that today, approximately 1.4m or 61% of premises in Ireland can get high speed broadband of a minimum of 30 Megabits per second. The NBP has been a catalyst in encouraging investment by the telecoms sector, which is continuing to expand this footprint.

In April, I signed a commitment agreement with eir in relation to its plans to provide broadband to an additional 300,000 premises in rural areas on a commercial basis. Eir has committed to doing this work over a 90 week period, with an average of 500 premises passed per day. My Department will be monitoring this roll-out to ensure that eir meets its obligations under the Agreement. A copy of the Commitment Agreement is available on my Department's website www.dccae.gov.ie.

On the same day I published an updated High Speed Broadband Map which is available at www.broadband.gov.ie, which finalises the State Intervention area for the procurement process. The updated Map shows the following categories of areas for delivery of broadband:

- The BLUE areas represent those areas where commercial telecommunications providers are either currently delivering or have indicated plans to deliver high speed broadband services,
- The AMBER areas on the High Speed Broadband Map represent the areas that will require State Intervention and are the subject of the current procurement process.

It is intended that all premises will have access to services of at least 30 megabits per second when the procurement process is completed and the network rolled out.

The map shows that 100% of Bree in the townland of Knocknagoss, Co Wexford falls within a BLUE area where eir is planning to deliver high speed broadband by end 2018. The map also shows that 28% of Ballinamuck in the townland of Shanmullagh Co Longford is in an AMBER area and will require State Intervention while the remaining 72% falls within the BLUE area covered by commercial operators.

Individuals can themselves check whether their premises is in a BLUE or an AMBER area by accessing the High Speed Broadband Map and entering their Eircode at www.broadband.gov.ie

A formal procurement process is in train to select a company or companies who will roll-out a new high speed broadband network within the State Intervention Area. The procurement process is being intensively managed, to ensure an outcome that delivers a future-proofed network that serves homes and businesses across Ireland, for at least 25 years. The finalisation of the State Intervention Area for the procurement process is an important milestone as it means

that bidders can progress their business plans and the Department can move to the next stage of the procurement. The three bidders have indicated that they are proposing a predominantly fibre-to-the-home solution. A fibre-to-the-home solution means that householders and businesses may get speeds not just of 30 Megabits per second but much higher, potentially up to 1000 Megabits per second.

The State Intervention network will be a wholesale network and retail service providers will be able to use the network to provide enhanced broadband services to their customers.

The timeframe for the procurement continues to be dependent on a range of factors including the complexities that may be encountered by the procurement team and bidders, during the procurement process. During the Department's extensive stakeholder consultations in 2015, telecommunications service providers indicated a 3-5 year timeline to roll-out a network of the scale envisaged under the NBP, once contracts are in place.

The Department will engage with winning bidder(s) on the best roll-out strategy, in order to target areas of particularly poor service, business needs and/or high demand.

The Programme for Government also commits to measures to assist in the roll-out of the network once a contract is awarded.

In this regard, I established a Mobile Phone and Broadband Task Force in July 2016 together with Minister Humphreys to identify immediate solutions to broadband and mobile phone coverage deficits and investigate how better services could be provided to consumers prior to the full build and roll-out of the network planned under the National Broadband Plan State intervention. The report of the Task Force was published in December and is available at the following link: <http://www.dcae.gov.ie/communications/en-ie/Pages/Publication/Report-of-the-Mobile-Phone-and-Broadband-Taskforce.aspx>.

In producing this report, the Task Force worked with Departments, local authorities, ComReg, State agencies, the telecoms industry and other key stakeholders. The report contains 40 actions that will alleviate some of the telecommunications deficits across Ireland and the implementation programme on mobile phone and broadband access identifies 19 of these actions as areas where immediate and direct action by Departments and State agencies can ensure accelerated benefits to consumers.

The work of the Task Force will also assist local authorities in preparing for the roll-out of the new NBP network once contracts are in place.

In addition, I signed regulations allowing ComReg to proceed with the allocation of spectrum in the 3.6 GHz radio spectrum band. On 22 May, ComReg announced the result of its 3.6 GHz spectrum award which will provide an 86% increase in total spectrum available for mobile and fixed wireless services.

In my Department's Estimates for 2017, I have secured an €8 million provision for RTE to allow it to free up the 700 MHz spectrum band. ComReg in turn will make plans to allocate this spectrum to provide for significantly enhanced mobile coverage. The 700 MHz band is particularly suited to rural environments where the signal can travel long distances.

These initiatives should assist in enhancing the quality of mobile phone and data services across Ireland and particularly in rural Ireland.

Better Energy Homes Scheme Expenditure

247. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the cost to the State to extend the warmer home scheme to include the upgrade of windows and doors over five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26147/17]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten): The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) administers the Better Energy Warmer Homes scheme on behalf of my Department. The scheme provides energy efficiency upgrades free of charge to people who meet the eligibility criteria. Typical measures available under the scheme include attic and cavity wall insulation, draught proofing, lagging jackets and low energy light bulbs.

The measures currently offered under the Warmer Homes schemes were selected as the best balance that could be achieved between the limited resources available to the scheme, the number of homes that can receive support and the energy savings that can be delivered. In short, the measures supported are those that can deliver the most energy savings at the lowest cost to the highest number of people. While upgrading windows and doors does improve the energy efficiency of a home, the cost of these measures is high in relation to the energy efficiency gains made.

For example, SEAI estimate that the cost of installing a basic energy efficient window package is €6,000 per home. The inclusion of windows under the Better Energy Warmer Homes scheme, which is free to those in receipt of the Fuel Allowance, would increase the average cost per home to €8,641 rather than the 2016 average of €2,641. In 2016, this would have required an extra €41m to complete the same number of homes, or could have meant that 4,800 fewer homes in energy poverty would have received upgrades from the 2016 budget allocation.

Nevertheless as we move towards deeper renovation of homes, as will be necessary to meet our 2020 and 2030 climate and energy goals, window and door replacement could become cost effective as part of a wider package of upgrades to the fabric of a building. My Department and SEAI are now testing out the channels for carrying out deeper renovation in homes across the country to inform future policy.

For this reason window and door upgrades are eligible for funding under the Better Energy Communities scheme in 2017, when carried out as part of a combined fabric upgrade, which also includes upgrades to insulation and ventilation. Grant funding is available for up to 50% of the cost of these works in homes and up to 95% funding is available for those in energy poverty.

Additionally, under the Warmth & Wellbeing pilot scheme, energy efficient windows and doors are installed wherever a surveyor deems them necessary. This scheme is currently only available in certain areas of Dublin but an independent research project is underway to determine the health benefits the efficiency improvements deliver and at the conclusion of the pilot I will consider the scope for the wider expansion of the scheme.

The Deputy may also note that the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government funds the Housing Aid for Older People scheme. This scheme is administered by Local Authorities and provides grants to older people living in poor housing conditions to have necessary repairs or improvements carried out. Eligible works include structural repairs or improvements, re-wiring, repairs to (or replacement of), windows and doors, provision of water supply, sanitary facilities and heating.

Question No. 248 answered with Question No. 246.

249. **Deputy Jim Daly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that persons in County Cork are waiting seven weeks to be issued their driving licence from the date of application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26073/17]

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

Question Heading for question(s) 250

250. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he will announce the recipients of the sports capital grant scheme programme 2017; the funding he has at his disposal for 2017 allocations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26075/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): A record 2,320 applications were submitted under the 2017 Sports Capital Programme and all of these are being assessed by officials in my Department.

Given the number of applications received and the detailed information submitted, it will take a number of months to complete the assessment process with allocations not expected until September.

A total of €30m is available for allocation.

Ports Development

251. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will carry out a feasibility study of the possible development of a deep sea port at Arklow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26162/17]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Arklow harbour is under the control of Wicklow County Council. The council is responsible for any development works at the harbour.

Road Projects Status

252. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if applications have been made to his Department for the construction of a port access road in Arklow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26163/17]

253. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if applications have been made to his Department for the construction of roads in Arklow; the stage each application is at; the decisions which have been made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26164/17]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 252 and 253 together.

The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads in Wicklow is the statutory responsibility of Wicklow County Council, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from the Council's own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the Council.

I can confirm that no applications were received by my Department for the construction of a port access road in Arklow. Applications for these types of works are usually submitted through the Departments Specific and Strategic Grant schemes; however, in order to protect funding for regional and local road maintenance and repair in recent years these schemes have been curtailed.

It is however open to the Council to fund such projects from their own resources. The purpose of Exchequer funding is to supplement the own resources of local authorities, not to meet the full cost of schemes.

Traffic Calming Measures

254. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a safety audit has been carried out on the N83 at Dunmore town; if not, when it will occur; the reason it has not occurred; the safety measures his Department in conjunction with Transport Infrastructure Ireland are examining to address calming measures on entering the town; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26185/17]

255. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a safety audit is being carried out on the N65 at Killmeen Cross; if not, when it will occur; the reason it has not occurred; the safety measures his Department in conjunction with Transport Infrastructure Ireland are examining to address lighting, signage, flooding and speed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26186/17]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 254 and 255 together.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and operation of individual road projects (including the N83 and N63) is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

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

Driver Test Regulations

256. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if young persons aged 16 and 17 years of age will continue to be able to undertake a driver theory test in view of the new policy applying from June 2017 that all applicants must hold a public services card to sit a driver theory test; if he has received an assurance from the Department of Social Protection that young persons aged 16 and 17 years of age will be able to apply for and receive a public services card which is now a requirement to sit the driver theory test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26268/17]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I would like to as-

sure the Deputy that the Road Safety Authority (which has responsibility for the driver theory test) has been working closely with the Department of Social Protection in the implementation of this change.

The Public Services Card (PSC) is available to any person with a PPS Number over 16 years of age. Face-to-face registration for a Public Services Card is called SAFE (Standard Authentication Framework Environment) registration. An appointment to get a PSC can be made online, by phone or by calling into one of the 100 SAFE locations nationwide. Details are available on www.welfare.ie. Once a person has successfully SAFE registered, their PSC will be issued to them within 5-7 working days.

Trade Agreements

257. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the details of discussions she has had with the Minister for Social Protection regarding the potential impact of international trade agreements such as CETA on the social protection system here, particularly in view of the fact that the only social protection-related issues included on the negative list in the CETA text refers to services relating to convalescent and rest houses and old people's homes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26194/17]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): Ireland is an open trading economy. Under successive governments Ireland has continued to promote a policy for open international trade and competition. This has greatly benefitted our economy. My Department consults relevant Government Departments at every stage of a negotiation of a free trade agreement. My Department consulted the Department of Health in relation to privately funded convalescent and rest houses and old people's homes as the Department of Health has primary responsibility in this area.

The EU – Canada Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) commits Canada, the EU and its Member States to permit access to each other's domestic services market (the Market Access Commitment) and to treat foreign services suppliers no less favourably than their own service suppliers (the National Treatment Commitment).

There are exceptions to the general commitments to liberalisation of the services market. These are listed in Annex I (Reservations for existing measures and liberalisation commitments) and Annex II (Reservations for future measures) to the Agreement. There are EU specific exceptions that cover all of the Member States and Ireland is also covered by its own specific exceptions.

Annex II lists all the existing measures and restrictions that the EU and Ireland want to maintain in relation to Canadian service providers. These include measures regarding public services, public monopolies and public utilities such as health, education, water supply and social services at all levels of government. In addition, the EU and Ireland reserve the right to adopt new or different and even more restrictive measures in the future.

In Annex II, Ireland also reserves the right to adopt any measure with respect to the supply of privately funded social services other than services relating to convalescent and rest houses and old people's homes. This exception was included as it is important to support and encourage investment in relation to convalescent and rest houses and old people's homes given the pressures Ireland faces with an increasingly aging population.

I would also point out that Ireland can continue regulating any liberalised services sector but it will have to do so without imposing quotas or discriminating, so rules should apply in the

same way to domestic and foreign service suppliers alike.

National Minimum Wage

258. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to raise the minimum wage to meet the living wage; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26196/17]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): The Living Wage concept is grounded in the idea that a person's wage should be sufficient to maintain a safe, decent standard of living. At an individual level the resources required to achieve a minimum essential standard of living is very dependent on family circumstances and thus the interaction of individual earnings with household income and State-provided supports such as Child Benefit, Family Income Supplement as well as supports available in relation to housing, education and health all contribute to an individual's standard of living.

It is important that Ireland's statutory National Minimum Wage and the Living Wage concept are not conflated. The Living Wage is a voluntary societal initiative centred on the social, business and economic case to ensure that, wherever it can be afforded, employers will pay a rate of pay that provides an income that is sufficient to meet an individual's basic needs, such as housing, food, clothing, transport and healthcare. The Living Wage is voluntary and has no legislative basis and is therefore not a statutory entitlement. It is different to the National Minimum Wage which is a statutory entitlement and has a legislative basis.

The Low Pay Commission was established in 2015 and its primary function is to, on an annual basis, examine and make recommendations on the national minimum wage, with a view to securing that the national minimum wage, where adjusted, is adjusted incrementally over time having had regard to changes in earnings, productivity, overall competitiveness and the likely impact any adjustment will have on employment and unemployment levels. The Commission presented its first report in July 2015 in which it recommended an that the minimum wage increase to €9.15 per hour. That increase, which was accepted by Government, came into effect on 1 January last 2016.

The Commission presented its second report in July 2016 and its recommendation that the minimum wage be increased to €9.25 per hour was subsequently accepted by Government and came into effect on January 1 last.

The Deputy might note that figures published by EUROSTAT in March of this year show that Ireland has the second highest national minimum wage of any country in the EU at €1,563 per month, behind only Luxembourg whose minimum wage is €1,999 per month. (EUROSTAT for comparison purposes converts countries hourly or weekly rates into monthly rates).

I have no plans to bring forward proposals outside of the work of the Low Pay Commission.

Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement

259. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to immediately increase staff or funding in the interim to the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement. [26090/17]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): Since I took up office as the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, five forensic account-

tants have joined the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement and a recruitment process is underway for a further two. Additionally, a senior digital forensics specialist is expected to take up duty with the ODCE in June.

In addition, and due to a combination of retirement, promotion and transfer, three senior enforcement positions are currently vacant. The Department is working with the Director towards the filling of those vacancies with suitably qualified and experienced candidates.

The Department has no outstanding sanction requests from the Director of Corporate Enforcement.

Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement

260. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation her views on whether the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement can be kept within the remit of her Department; and her further views on whether it would be more successful under the auspices of another Department. [26091/17]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): The investigative shortcomings of the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement (ODCE) identified by Judge John Aylmer in this case are unacceptable. They fell far short of the standard impartial, unbiased and thorough investigation we expect and demand.

I have written to the Director of Corporate Enforcement on Wednesday May 24, requesting a report under section 955(1)(a) of the Companies Act 2014. This report is to outline issues arising from the investigations by the ODCE into Anglo Irish Bank since 2008. In particular, I have ordered that the report include an explanation of the following:

- the coaching of witness statements;
- late disclosure of documents;
- a perceived bias by ODCE investigators;
- the shredding of documents; and
- any other relevant matters.

I expect this report to be finalised as a matter of urgency and no later than June 23. I have already stated in this House that I will consider all options to ensure mistakes of this nature cannot reoccur. This includes procedures, organisational change, enhanced powers, legislative solutions or an entirely new model.

Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement

261. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the stage at which her attention was drawn to the serious failings and problems within the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement as highlighted in a case (details supplied). [26092/17]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): I was briefed by Department officials on developments with the Anglo investigations shortly after taking up office as the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

As a matter of course, previous ministers were similarly briefed on issues related to the Anglo investigations. In particular, a Memorandum to Government accompanied the ODCE Annual Report each year which would have outlined progress in key cases.

Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement Legal Cases

262. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the engagement her Department had with the ODCE in advance of a case (details supplied); if resources were discussed in the context of that case; the decisions made; if the attention of her Department was drawn to the shredding of documents; if so when; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26199/17]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): Under the provisions of the Companies Act 2014, the Director of Corporate Enforcement is independent in the exercise of his functions.

On March 16, 2011, the Secretaries General of the then Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation and the then Department of Justice and Law Reform met with the Garda Commissioner and officials from the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement. The meeting was arranged to ensure that all appropriate resources were available to the Gardaí and the ODCE to progress their investigations. It was made clear at the meeting that the independence of all the agencies involved in carrying out the investigations was fully respected and there was a clear desire at all levels that nothing would be done which would in any way impinge on that.

In response to inquiries, both the Gardaí and the ODCE stressed that as far as they were concerned they had adequate resources. The Commissioner stressed that both himself and his predecessor had at all times ensured that the Garda team had all the resources they required. For their part, the ODCE were satisfied with the resources available to them and had received anything that they looked for. If they felt at any stage that anything further was required they would, of course, look for it.

Both the Gardaí and ODCE were asked to reflect again on whether there was anything at all by way of additional help that could be made available to them in their work. It was stated that any such requests would be responded to positively.

The then Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Richard Bruton T.D., met the Director of Corporate Enforcement with Department officials on 6 May 2015. At that meeting, the Minister was informed of the destruction of documents and other weaknesses in the investigation.

As the matter was before the courts, it was sub judice. It was considered that no steps should be taken that would interfere with the prosecution of the case and the separation of powers between the Executive and the Judiciary.

National Minimum Wage

263. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to abolish the sub-minima rates of the minimum wage for trainees and youth workers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26260/17]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): In October 2016 the Low Pay Commission submitted its report on the sub-minima rates of the

National Minimum Wage Act 2000, which included a study by the ESRI on the usage of sub-minima rates both in Ireland and internationally. The Commission found that sub-minima rates of a similar nature are in use in a number of OECD countries. It concluded that incidence of usage of the sub-minima rates in Ireland is extremely low, with available evidence suggesting that just 0.1% of employees are currently in receipt of the youth rates and between 0.2 and 0.3% are in receipt of the trainee rates. Their report also indicated that there is no evidence of significant abuse when it comes to the application of sub-minima rates.

Given that the remit of the Low Pay Commission is to make its recommendations using an evidence-based approach, the Commission had agreed with the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in early 2016 the inclusion, on a pilot basis, of a specific question on the national minimum wage, and the use of sub-minima rates, in the CSO's Quarterly National Household Survey series. The Commission indicated in its 2016 report that it did not consider it appropriate to make recommendations on the appropriateness of the current sub-minima rates at that stage, but would await the availability of the up-to-date data on usage of the rates from the CSO before making any recommendation.

I understand that the results from the pilot question for 2016 are currently being verified by the CSO, and I understand that the Low Pay Commission intends to submit its recommendations in a supplementary report, on receipt of the verified data from the CSO. The question of whether a change in the current system might be warranted or desirable will be considered further in light of the Commission's recommendations.

HIQA Reports

264. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she has received a report on Tusla by HIQA in the past month; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26150/17]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): In the past month, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs has not received a specific report on Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, from the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA).

My Department is routinely provided with HIQA inspection reports on the services provided by Tusla. These reports are published by HIQA on its website. As of 29 May, 2017, 16 inspection reports have been published, three of which were published in May 2017. HIQA carries out inspections independently against the relevant standards for a number of services, including: children residential centres; special care units; private and statutory foster care services; and Tusla's child welfare and protection services.

HIQA Reports

265. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she has received HIQA's report on the management of allegations of child sexual abuse; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26151/17]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): Earlier this year I directed the Health Information Quality Authority, under Section 9 of the Health Act 2007, to carry out a statutory investigation of Tusla's management of allegations of child sexual abuse. HIQA published its Terms of Reference and methodology for this investigation on 25 April 2017. The HIQA investigation is to assess how local, regional and national governance ar-

rangements in Tulsa are supporting the effective management of child-sexual abuse referrals involving adults of concern (including allegations of child-sexual abuse made by adults in relation to when they were children).

The statutory investigation is precluded from examining matters that fall within the Terms of Reference of the Tribunal of Inquiry established to inquire into certain protected disclosures, arising from the protected disclosures made by Garda Sergeant Maurice McCabe. HIQA has stated that in the interest of fair procedures, it does not envisage making public comment on the investigation prior to publication.

Publication of the final report is now a matter for HIQA, following approval by the HIQA Board. I look forward to receiving the report in due course.

Child Care Services Funding

266. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the allocated funding for city and county child care facilities, by county, in each of the years 2012 to 2016 in tabular form. [26167/17]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The information requested by the Deputy is outlined in the following table:

County	2012 Funding	2013 Funding	2014 Funding	2015 Funding	2016 Funding
Carlow	267,874.00	244,000.00	224,000.00	223,965.00	224,000.00
Cavan	268,000.00	248,000.00	234,000.00	234,000.00	234,000.00
Clare	310,510.00	306,670.00	289,524.00	272,387.00	296,290.00
Cork	769,927.00	785,000.00	756,395.00	780,981.00	795,922.48
Donegal	370,000.00	363,000.00	363,000.00	363,000.00	370,000.00
Dublin	2,120,832.00	2,091,000.00	2,082,979.00	2,128,660.38	2,426,532.42
Galway	463,000.00	454,000.00	448,001.00	451,241.00	456,378.00
Kerry	365,000.00	354,000.00	347,000.00	345,108.00	348,500.00
Kildare	405,000.00	393,000.00	383,625.00	383,547.00	384,952.33
Kilkenny	276,869.00	263,000.00	255,000.00	254,899.19	254,988.13
Laois	254,231.00	244,000.00	230,000.00	69,000.00	192,500.00
Leitrim	249,000.00	227,000.00	208,924.00	208,997.00	208,997.00
Limerick	576,877.00	541,438.00	546,000.00	541,373.00	546,000.00
Longford	249,000.00	227,000.00	209,000.00	209,000.00	209,000.00
Louth	304,699.00	313,000.00	298,434.00	303,773.00	301,761.89

County	2012 Funding	2013 Funding	2014 Funding	2015 Funding	2016 Funding
Mayo	329,000.00	319,000.00	313,000.00	313,000.00	313,000.00
Meath	393,268.00	383,436.00	373,863.00	380,997.00	380,920.00
Monaghan	268,000.00	248,000.00	234,000.00	234,000.00	234,000.00
Offaly	275,516.00	252,117.00	232,374.00	239,967.00	233,680.05
Roscommon	267,193.00	248,000.00	234,000.00	234,000.00	234,000.00
Sligo	268,000.00	248,000.00	234,000.00	233,588.00	307,102.50
Tipperary	544,747.00	508,000.00	479,000.00	478,063.00	440,189.68
Waterford	532,683.00	492,000.00	458,000.00	456,765.00	458,000.00
Westmeath	273,739.00	256,000.00	241,000.00	241,000.00	240,918.37
Wexford	362,871.00	359,000.00	336,524.00	346,478.00	345,631.19
Wicklow	332,254.00	317,000.00	302,890.00	302,775.00	302,782.00
	11,098,090.00	10,684,661.00	10,314,533.00	10,230,564.57	10,740,046.04

Child and Family Agency Staff

267. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if the office for historical cases has been set up in Tusla; the number of persons working in that department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26168/17]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): A historical or retrospective disclosure is where an adult discloses abuse experienced in childhood. I understand that the overwhelming majority of such disclosures are about sexual abuse.

I can advise the Deputy that the management of all referrals including retrospective/historical cases occurs at Area level. Tusla has advised me that a service improvement plan has been put in place to deal with these outstanding cases. In the first instance, specialist teams are working on high priority cases. Medium and low priority cases will be assessed by social workers who will be drawn from non-child protection teams, on a project basis, to deal with this work. The sections of Tusla they will be drawn from include adoption, quality assurance and training.

There is no plan to establish such an office, as described by the Deputy, in Tusla. Each retrospective case referred to Tusla will be screened by the Area Duty Team who will initially establish if there are any known child protection concerns and the Area will respond thereafter, as appropriate, to the referral.

Child and Family Agency Expenditure

268. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the percentage of the Tusla budget which has been used on addressing historical cases from 2011 to 2016,

by county, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26169/17]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The information sought by the Deputy has been requested from the Child and Family Agency and I will respond directly to the Deputy when the information is received.

Youth Work Projects Funding

269. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the current and capital expenditure allocations for youth work from her Department in each of the years 2014 to 2016, and to date in 2017, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26253/17]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): My Department administers a range of funding schemes and programmes to support the provision of youth services to young people throughout the country including those from disadvantaged communities. The funding schemes support national and local youth work involving approximately 1,400 youth work staff working in youth services and communities throughout the country.

Budget 2017 provided an additional €5.5m in current funding to my Department to support the provision of these youth services. This will bring total youth funding in 2017 to €57.4m. The current allocations to my Department between 2014 and 2016 were as follows:

Year	Current allocation
2014	€49.78
2015	€49.93
2016	€51.86

In recent years, capital funding has been made available to my Department to purchase equipment and to support small scale projects, including refurbishment, health and safety fit-outs and accessibility improvements in local voluntary youth services. The capital allocations to my Department between 2014 and 2016 were as follows:

Year	Capital allocation
2014	€500,000
2015	€500,000
2016	€2,600,000

My Department is developing proposals for the disbursal of the 2017 capital funding allocation and I hope to be in a position to announce details in the coming months.

Youth Work Projects Funding

270. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the way in which the additional €5.5 million for youth work services has been allocated in 2017; the additional funding that has been allocated to schemes (details supplied) in 2017 in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26254/17]

271. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the details of the €51 million allocation to youth work services in 2016, including the allocation to schemes (details supplied); the way in which the balance of the €51 million funding other than

to the schemes was allocated, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26255/17]

272. Deputy Thomas P. Broughan asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the way in which the €57.4 million allocation to youth work services was allocated in 2017, including the allocation to schemes (details supplied); and the way in which the balance of the €57.4 million funding other than to the schemes was allocated in tabular form. [26256/17]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I propose to take Questions Nos. 270 to 272, inclusive, together.

My Department administers a range of funding schemes and programmes to support the provision of youth services to young people throughout the country including those from disadvantaged communities. The funding schemes support national and local youth work provision involving approximately 1,400 youth work staff and 40,000 volunteers working in youth work services and communities throughout the country.

Budget 2017 provided an additional €5.5m in current funding to my Department to support the provision of these youth services. This will bring total youth funding in 2017 to €57.4m. This additional funding has been used for programmes that target disadvantaged young people and to assist national youth organisations in their work to support local voluntary youth services. The following table shows the 2016 and 2017 allocations, broken down by funding line:

Fund	2016	2017
Special Projects for Youth	€14,061,769	€14,764,857
Young People's Facilities and Services Fund (Round 1)	€5,279,042	€5,542,994
Young People's Facilities and Services Fund (Round 2)	€12,675,829	€13,309,620
Local Drugs Task Force Projects	€1,123,829	€1,180,021
Targeted funds total	€33,140,469	€34,797,492
Youth Information Centres	€1,216,562	€1,277,390
Youth Service Grant Scheme	€10,148,980	€10,651,765
Sample VFMPR Projects	€418,535	€2,029,462
Local Youth Club Grant Scheme	€1,997,068	€2,103,568
Youth Officer Allocation and Technical Assistance	€3,166,372	€3,423,374
LGBTI+ Youth Strategy	0	€400,000
Other National Youth Organisations and Youth Initiatives	€1,511,073	€1,635,281
DCYA Policy and Support Programmes	€286,118	€476,669
New Initiatives and other funding streams within Department	0	€600,000
Total	€51,885,179	€57,395,000

White Paper on Defence

273. Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the measures that have taken place to increase the operational capacity and numbers in the Army ranger wing as per the recommendations in the White Paper on Defence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26086/17]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): The Army Ranger Wing (ARW) are the Special Operations Forces of the Defence Forces. In this context, the ARW are trained and equipped to undertake a range of specialist roles. Details with regard to the strength of the ARW are not released into the public domain for security and operational

reasons.

The White Paper on Defence (2015) sets out the capability agenda for the Defence Forces for the next decade. It contains a commitment to further enhance the capabilities of the ARW. Work to identify a range of options in this regard is ongoing as part of the implementation of the White Paper.