

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 27 inclusive, answered orally.

Questions Nos. 28 to 41, inclusive, resubmitted.

Questions Nos. 42 to 46, inclusive, answered orally.

Ministerial Meetings

47. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on his recent meeting with the former US Secretary of State, Mr. Rex Tillerson. [14025/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I met with US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, in Washington, D.C., on Friday 23 February, 2018. I would like, at the outset, to take this opportunity to wish Secretary Tillerson, who has now left his position, all the best for the future. I look forward to working with his successor in due course, once the nomination process has been completed.

The meeting with Secretary Tillerson was conducted in a warm and constructive atmosphere, as befits the relationship between our two countries.

While we discussed a wide range of bilateral and global issues, the Deputy will appreciate from her own time as Tánaiste that much of the detail of such discussions must, by its nature, remain confidential.

I am happy however, to confirm to the Deputy that amongst the topics which we discussed were the plight of undocumented Irish citizens living in the United States, the appointment of a new US ambassador to Ireland, the situation in the Middle-East, Brexit and the situation in Northern Ireland, including the possible appointment of a US Special Envoy.

On the undocumented, I reiterated once more the priority which the Irish Government attaches to achieving a solution for our citizens and to finding greater legal pathways for migration from Ireland to the United States. As the Deputy will be aware, the issue was also subsequently discussed by the Taoiseach and President Trump when they met in the Oval Office on March 15 last. Our efforts to find a solution, working with the Administration and with our friends on Capitol Hill, and with the Government's Special Envoy to the US Congress on the Undocumented, Deputy John Deasy, will continue.

On the broader Ireland-US relationship, I indicated to the Secretary of State how well-received the appointment of a new US Ambassador to Ireland in the near future would be and

how it is seen as a very important position in Ireland.

I updated Secretary Tillerson on the current situation in Northern Ireland. In particular, I indicated that we would welcome the appointment of a Special Envoy for Northern Ireland by the US Administration, as part of its continuing support for the Peace Process.

I also briefed the Secretary of State on the EU-UK Brexit negotiations, emphasising Ireland's continued commitment to the EU and our opposition to a hard border on the island of Ireland.

We discussed the Middle East Peace Process, an issue to which I have attached a high priority as Minister for Foreign Affairs & Trade, as I have reported to the House previously. It was a good opportunity to outline to the Secretary of State Ireland's position on the key issues.

We also discussed US tax reform and whether it would have any implications for the bilateral economic relationship.

All in all, it was a very constructive meeting, indicative of the strength of the political and economic relationships between Ireland and the United States.

Questions Nos. 48 to 52, inclusive, answered orally.

Syrian Conflict

53. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if his attention has drawn to the plight of civilians in Afrin, in northern Syria, and the fact that the city has now been captured by the Turkish Army and its allied militia, the Free Syrian Army; his views on the safety for Kurdish civilians in Afrin in view of Turkey's human rights record; and if he will call for Turkey and its allied militias to immediately leave Afrin. [14195/18]

61. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has raised with the Turkish Government the recent invasion of the Afrin region in northern Syria; his views on the invasion of the region by Turkish forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14021/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 53 and 61 together.

The continued suffering of civilians in Syria remains a source of deep concern. I am particularly concerned by the impact of the recent fighting in the Afrin region, including the displacement of over 100,000 civilians.

Ireland strongly welcomed the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2401 calling for an immediate ceasefire and unhindered humanitarian access on 24 February. Ireland regrets that this has not yet been implemented and calls on the international community to redouble efforts to ensure the immediate and full implementation.

Officials from my Department met with the Turkish Ambassador to Ireland in early February, shortly after the commencement of the Turkish operation. They conveyed Ireland's overarching concern for the protection of civilians, including in the context of this particular operation, and urged caution to avoid escalating the conflict any further.

Moreover, at the EU-Turkey leaders' meeting in Varna on Monday, the EU informed President Erdogan of the EU's concern regarding Turkey's actions in Syria, in particular the situa-

tion in Afrin. They stressed that escalating violence and displacement in an already tragic and volatile situation must be avoided. They also emphasised Turkey's responsibility to ensure the protection of civilians and the delivery of humanitarian assistance to all those in need.

Ireland and the EU understand Turkey's concern about the conflict raging on its southern border. Turkey has borne a heavy burden in terms of knock-on effects of the conflict, including in terms of migration and spill-over of violence. However, our primary concern is for the safety and well-being of civilians on both sides of the border, especially displaced and vulnerable communities.

Ireland is a long-standing supporter of the UNHCR which has been providing humanitarian assistance in response to the developing crisis in the Afrin region. Ireland provided core funding of €7.5 million to UNHCR in 2017. Core funding enables UNHCR to respond efficiently and effectively where assistance is most needed, including in response to sudden displacement emergencies. Ireland has also provided over €7 million to UNHCR specifically for its response to the Syria crisis since 2012.

I take this opportunity to reiterate my call on all parties to exercise restraint in order to avoid any further exacerbation of this already fragile situation, and to cooperate in the effort to find a political solution under UN auspices. This alone can bring lasting peace to Syria.

EU Issues

54. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the status of the funding of €100,000 available to community and voluntary organisations to promote dialogue on the future of Europe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14022/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The funding to which the Deputy refers is the Communicating Europe Initiative. This year's grant scheme was launched by the Minister of State for European Affairs, Helen McEntee, TD on 8th March last, coinciding with the Regional Citizen's Dialogue on the Future of Europe in Letterkenny, Co Donegal. This year, funding up to a total of €100,000 will be available to voluntary organisations, educational bodies and civil society groups to support projects which communicate European issues to the general public. The maximum individual grant will be €15,000. The Communicating Europe Initiative is aimed at deepening public awareness of the role the EU plays in our daily lives and at improving the quality and accessibility of public information on European issues, particularly at regional or national level.

Projects should seek to communicate European issues, the role of the European Union and Ireland's place in Europe and may include public conversations through Citizens' dialogue-type events.

Projects promoting dialogue on the Future of Europe are particularly encouraged this year. Further details of the Communicating Europe Scheme can be found on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's website. It has also be promoted via NGO and other stakeholder networks. The closing date for applications is Wednesday 18th April next.

Question No. 55 answered with Question No. 51.

Question No. 56 answered with Question No. 49.

Foreign Policy

57. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the political situation in Hong Kong in view of recent by-elections. [14222/18]

62. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has raised the disqualification of legislators in Hong Kong with his Chinese counterparts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14201/18]

66. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the continuance of democratic rights in Hong Kong. [14223/18]

75. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has discussed the political situation in Hong Kong with the Chinese authorities. [14221/18]

86. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will raise the need for full democratic rights in Hong Kong with the Chinese authorities. [14224/18]

92. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the erosion of democratic rights in Hong Kong; the communications he has had with the Irish Consulate regarding the recent by-elections in Hong Kong; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14202/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 57, 62, 66, 75, 86 and 92 together.

The Government follows the political developments which are taking place in Hong Kong on an ongoing basis, including the by-elections which took place on 11 March.

In the lead-up to my recent visit to China, and during my visit to Hong Kong on 12 March, I was briefed on the most recent developments by Ireland's Consulate General and by the Embassy in Beijing.

I discussed the particular political situation in Hong Kong with the Chief Executive Carrie Lam when I met her in Hong Kong on 12 March.

Ireland has been consistent in its support for the full implementation of the Basic Law and the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle. This system provides Hong Kong with a high degree of autonomy, rule of law, an independent judiciary, democratic separation of powers, and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. I believe that this continues to deliver positive benefits to the people of Hong Kong, to the People's Republic of China, and its global partners, including Ireland. I hope that electoral reform in Hong Kong can be taken forward in future, within the framework of the Basic Law and the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle, in a manner that is democratic, fair, open and transparent.

Question No. 58 answered with Question No. 49.

Passport Services

59. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if additional seasonal personnel will be allocated for the Passport Office earlier than the usual seasonal increase in view of the current levels of passport applications being processed (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11049/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The

Passport Service monitors the volume of applications on an ongoing basis to ensure that resources are available to meet demand. In order to respond to anticipated application increases and to seasonal demands, the Passport Service received sanction for 220 Temporary Clerical Officers (“TCOs”) this year to be appointed to the Passport Offices in Dublin and Cork. The vast majority of the TCOs will be on a 26 week contract. The Passport Service commenced recruitment in October and November of last year for the intake of TCOs for this year. This intake commenced in early January, and all of the TCOs will be in place by the end of March. The allocation of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff assigned to the Passport Service as of 1 January this year is 322. This is an increase of 7% on the previous year. In addition, my Department has been working closely with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to examine the additional permanent staff requirements for the Passport Service. I am pleased to advise that 20 more newly appointed, permanent staff have joined the Passport Service since 1 January. Targeted overtime for the Passport Service was also sanctioned to increase processing capacity. In managing increasing application volumes, my Department’s approach has not been merely to recruit or assign additional staff, but to continue to implement service improvements in order to provide an exceptional service and minimise the impact exceptionally high application volumes have on turnaround times. The Passport Reform Programme is delivering major upgrades to the passport service technology platforms and business processes as well as significant customer service improvements. The award winning online passport application service, which was launched last year, will continue to make a major contribution to the effective management of exceptionally high volumes by allowing existing resources to be more effectively deployed within the Passport Service. At present, the online service only accommodates adult renewals and passport card applications. It is planned to further extend the online passport application service to all renewals by the end of 2018.

The Passport Service is working hard to minimise the impact of high application volumes on turnaround times and to ensure that all resources, including staffing, are effectively deployed.

European Court of Human Rights Judgments

60. **Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the way in which he can advance the issues surrounding the detention and treatment of persons (details supplied) in view of the recent decision of the European Court; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14050/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): On 20 March the European Court of Human Rights issued its judgment on the Government’s application for a revision of the ruling in the 1978 Ireland v UK case. The ruling will be fully considered by the Government. It is important to note that, although the Court dismissed the Government’s application for a revision, nothing in last week’s judgment alters the Court’s original 1978 ruling that the men suffered inhuman and degrading treatment, in breach of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. My thoughts are with the men who suffered this treatment, and who have had to deal with the long-lasting effects. I know that they are understandably disappointed with the judgment.

I have previously discussed with the Deputy the prospect of meeting the men to hear their experiences. Unfortunately a scheduled meeting had to be postponed due to Storm Emma, but I am due to meet the men in the coming weeks, and look forward to hearing directly from them.

Question No. 61 answered with Question No. 53.

Question No. 62 answered with Question No. 57.

Syrian Conflict

63. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has received the findings of the most recent EU review of the impact of sanctions on Syria (details supplied); the date on which the review was received; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11058/18]

68. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the actions the Government is taking with regard to the ongoing conflict in Syria. [11044/18]

85. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has received the humanitarian letter signed by over 100 organisations pleading with all parliamentary institutions throughout the world to stop the genocide, siege and forced displacement happening in eastern Ghouta in Syria; his plans to work urgently with his European counterparts to stop the genocide against civilians and condemn the Syrian regime and its allies' refusal to abide by the Security Council Resolution 2401; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14134/18]

97. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his plans to advocate at the EU Foreign Affairs Council for the need for EU members to be proactive regarding the ongoing civil war in Syria with a view towards working for peace; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14204/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 63, 68, 85 and 97 together.

I am aware of the letter to which Deputy Kenny refers. The situation in Syria is indeed unconscionable, and I take this opportunity to reiterate my unreserved condemnation of the barbarous violence against civilians that has been the hallmark of this conflict to date. The brutal repression of dissent by the Assad regime, which has included use of chemical weapons and medieval “starve or surrender” tactics, has cost the lives of over 400,000 people. It has led to a situation in which 13 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, 3 million people are trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, over 6 million people are displaced internally, and a further 5.5 million have fled to neighbouring countries and the wider region. The recent increase in violence, in particular the vicious siege of Eastern Ghouta, underscores the extent to which an end to the violence is urgently needed in order to relieve the suffering of the Syrian people.

Ireland fully supports the UN-led political negotiations to end the conflict based on the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and UN Security Council resolution 2254, which calls for an end to violence; release of political prisoners; formation of a transitional governing body with executive powers and a constitutional reform process. The EU provides direct assistance to the UN-led Geneva peace talks and has launched, in coordination with the UN, an initiative to develop political dialogue with key actors from the region to identify common ground.

I attended the UN Security Council briefing on Eastern Ghouta in New York last month at which UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres appealed for an immediate suspension of violence in Eastern Ghouta to allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid, and for evacuations. Ireland strongly welcomed the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2401 calling for an immediate ceasefire and unhindered humanitarian access on 24 February. However, the regime's bombardment of civilians and civilian infrastructure, including homes, hospitals and schools, has continued in defiance of this resolution. There have even been reports of further chemical attacks in recent weeks. The international community must redouble efforts to press

for the immediate and full implementation of the ceasefire, and unimpeded humanitarian access to populations in need.

Ireland provides political and financial support to a broad range of measures to ensure full legal accountability for all war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria. This includes the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism established by the UN General Assembly to assist in the investigation and prosecution of persons responsible for the most serious crimes under international law committed in Syria, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria established by the Human Rights Council, and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Fact Finding Mission and Joint Investigative Mission with the UN. Ireland co-sponsored a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council earlier this month that requested the Commission of Inquiry to urgently conduct an investigation into the recent events in Eastern Ghouta.

In addition, Ireland has consistently supported EU sanctions targeting the regime and its supporters, and will continue to do so as long as the situation on the ground justifies these measures. The relevant working groups in Brussels keep the impact of sanctions under review and propose options to address any unintended negative impacts where they are identified. For example, in 2016 the EU amended the Syria sanctions regime to make it easier for NGOs operating in Syria to buy fuel. In 2017, EU Member States including Ireland consulted with NGOs to identify any further difficulties they were experiencing in carrying out humanitarian work in Syria that may have been linked to the sanctions. Based on the feedback of the NGOs, the European Commission published a Frequently Asked Questions document to clarify certain provisions of the sanctions identified as unclear by NGOs, as well as the humanitarian exemptions and derogations. More recently, last month EU Member States undertook to consider the preparation of best practice guidelines on humanitarian exemptions, with a view to further facilitating the work of NGOs participating in the humanitarian response to the crisis in Syria.

EU Foreign Ministers discussed the situation in Syria at their informal meeting on 15 February and again at the Foreign Affairs Council meetings on 26 February and 19 March. The EU and its Member States have to date mobilised more than €10.4 billion for humanitarian, stabilisation and resilience assistance inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, making the EU the largest single donor to the effort. The EU hosted a donor conference for Syria in April 2017 at which pledges totalling €5.6 billion were made, and will host another donor conference for Syria in April 2018.

Since 2012, Ireland has contributed over €95 million to the humanitarian effort in response to the conflict in Syria, including €25 million in 2017 alone. Through our annual contributions to EU Institutions, Ireland also supports the EU's humanitarian response to the Syria crisis. Ireland will make a further pledge of humanitarian support in 2018 at the Brussels donor conference next month.

Brexit Issues

64. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if his Department has carried out a county analysis of the potential impact of Brexit here with particular reference to County Wexford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14009/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government is undertaking extensive analysis of the impact of Brexit on Ireland, much of which is in the public domain. This comprises research and outreach being carried out by individual Government Departments and agencies, as well as by stakeholder organisations, aca-

demic and others. Recent publications include the detailed response plan “Building Stronger Business - Responding to Brexit by competing, innovation and trading”, which was prepared by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and sets out a number of actions and supports already in place with a view to addressing the regional impact of Brexit. This research and outreach is informing the Government’s contingency planning, which is advancing intensively through the cross-Departmental coordination structures chaired by my Department. Each relevant Government Department has established the risks and impacts posed by Brexit, and provided mitigating actions, for their respective sectors. This work, which focuses on a “no deal” or worst-case outcome, provides a baseline scenario for the policies and sectors impacted, which can then be adapted as appropriate in light of developments in the EU-UK negotiations. This includes, as appropriate, any specific responses necessary according to regional needs and at the county level, including in Wexford.

The Government will publish a new paper in the coming months on our approach to the negotiations and our latest assessment of the economic and sectorial challenges posed by Brexit and our responses to them.

Brexit Negotiations

65. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the details of his engagement with the EU Brexit negotiating team and the UK Government with a view to ensuring regulatory alignment on agriculture matters after the UK leaving the European Union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14014/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I discuss Brexit collectively with my EU27 counterparts on a monthly basis at the General Affairs Council (Art. 50). Maintaining frequent bilateral contact with EU partners is also a priority, both at political and official level. Such meetings provide an opportunity to communicate Ireland’s priorities, including in relation to agriculture, with a view to shaping the EU’s negotiating position with regard to the draft Withdrawal Agreement, including its Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as the EU’s approach to framework for the future EU-UK relationship. As concerns my personal engagement with the Taskforce, I have met with Michel Barnier in advance of both the February and March meetings of the General Affairs Council (Art. 50). These efforts are yielding clear results. The Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, which is an integral part of the draft Withdrawal Agreement currently being negotiated between the EU and the UK, sets out in legal terms the backstop arrangement. It allows for full alignment with those rules of the EU’s internal market and the customs union which, now or in the future, support North-South cooperation, the all-island economy and the protection of the Good Friday Agreement. As set out in Article 5 of the draft Protocol, this arrangement would include alignment with the provisions of Union law on sanitary and phytosanitary rules as well as provisions of Union law on the production and marketing of agricultural and fisheries products. It has always been intended that the backstop will apply unless and until another solution is found. In this regard, the Government shares the UK’s preference to resolve these issues through the wider agreement on the EU’s future relationship with the UK. I look forward to seeing the UK’s detailed proposals in this regard, and to considering proposals on specific solutions. I also welcome the Guidelines on the future EU-UK relationship which were adopted by the European Council last week, which confirm the EU’s readiness to initiate work towards a balanced, ambitious and wide-ranging free trade agreement (FTA) insofar as there are sufficient guarantees for a level playing field. The EU proposes that such an agreement should cover all sectors, including agriculture, and should address, inter alia, disciplines on technical barriers to trade (TBT) and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures and a framework for voluntary

regulatory cooperation.

Brexit is an issue that naturally arises during the frequent bilateral contacts which I, my Government colleagues and our officials have with our UK counterparts. While stressing that Ireland is a member of the EU27 and that the issues involved can only be substantively considered and addressed through the ongoing EU-UK negotiations, such opportunities provide an opportunity to build the UK's understanding of Ireland's concerns and priorities with regard to the Irish-specific issues as well as the future EU-UK relationship, including in the area of agriculture.

In recent months, I have had numerous engagement with British Ministers. This has included the Minister for the Cabinet Office, David Lidington, the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU, David Davis, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond, the Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Karen Bradley. Minister Creed has also met with his counterpart, Secretary of State Gove, during the course of his St Patrick's Day visit to London. Brexit, and issues relevant to agriculture, have arisen in these meetings.

Question No. 66 answered with Question No. 57.

European Council Meetings

67. Deputy Joan Burton asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on his attendance at the EU Foreign Affairs Council in February 2018. [14024/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I attended the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on 26 February. The Council discussed developments in Moldova, the situation in Venezuela and the Middle East Peace Process. EU Foreign Ministers had a comprehensive discussion on Moldova and adopted Council Conclusions taking stock of the reform process and setting out expectations for the period ahead. Ministers also discussed developments in Venezuela, expressing deep concern at the deteriorating humanitarian, economic, political and social situation. During the discussion on the Middle East Peace Process, I updated my EU counterparts on my recent meetings in Washington with US Secretary of State Tillerson and Jared Kushner. I urged that the EU play a strong and proactive role in any new peace initiative and encouraged the Palestinians and other regional interlocutors to engage constructively on this. EU Ministers met over lunch with Foreign Ministers from Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, and the discussion focussed on the Middle East Peace Process.

Question No. 68 answered with Question No. 63.

UN Security Council Membership

69. Deputy Seán Crowe asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on Ireland's plans for securing a seat on the United Nations Security Council for the 2021-2022 term; if the election campaign has begun; the pitch Ireland is using to attract votes; and the issues Ireland will use its seat to promote if successful in the election. [14197/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland is seeking election to a UN Security Council non-permanent seat in June 2020 for the 2021-2022 term. We are one of three candidates for the two seats available to members of the Western European and Others regional group at the UN. Canada and Norway are the other two

candidates. Like Ireland, both countries have strong records of engagement at the UN and we co-operate closely with them on a range of issues. In order to be elected to the Security Council, Ireland will need to secure the support of two-thirds of the UN membership – approximately 129 votes of the 193 Member States. The campaign leading to the vote in 2020 is well under way. Member States normally signal their intention to seek election many years in advance. In this regard our candidature was first announced in 2005 and the campaign has been building since then. I am taking every opportunity to raise Ireland's candidature with the representatives of Member States. Last month I met with the representatives of countries from a number of regional groups at the UN's Headquarters in New York. I and my Cabinet colleagues will continue to make Ireland's case in the period ahead. In addition, my Department's diplomatic staff in Ireland, our Permanent Representation to the UN in New York, and our entire Embassy network have been actively presenting our case and seeking support. This effort will continue. The Security Council campaign is an opportunity to demonstrate Ireland's foreign policy values and credentials. Our candidature also reflects the centrality of the UN to Irish foreign policy. In making our case to the electorate, we will be highlighting our consistent record at the UN throughout more than six decades of membership. Among the areas in which we have built a strong reputation at the UN are peacekeeping, sustainable development, humanitarian action, disarmament and human rights.

The Security Council is the UN body with primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. It is difficult to predict what issues might be on the Council's agenda in 2021 – 2022 should Ireland's candidature be successful.

The Council's agenda today is, in many respects, very different to the one that faced its 15 members even just five years ago. Conflict and post-conflict situations in individual countries and regions remain central to the Council agenda. Increasingly, the Council is giving consideration to policy areas which are seen as important factors in international peace and security, including migration, climate change, the role of women and youth, sustainable development and food security. In this regard, it is noteworthy that this month, under the Presidency of The Netherlands, the Council has included discussion on water and conflict, as well as hunger and conflict

If Ireland were to be elected to a non-permanent seat on the Security Council our fundamental approach to any agenda item would be to advocate for the core values of our foreign policy - peace and security, justice, equality and sustainability.

Brexit Negotiations

70. Deputy Darragh O'Brien asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the length of time given to the transition period for Brexit; if he regards this as a sufficient amount of time in view of the complexity of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14208/18]

77. Deputy Brendan Howlin asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on the contributions, proposals or changes his department made to the EU proposal for a transition period and the proposed future relationship of the UK with the EU. [5755/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 70 and 77 together.

From the start of the EU-UK negotiations Ireland has been to fore in arguing for a transition-

al arrangement that ensures an orderly UK withdrawal from the Union, minimises disruption for citizens and businesses and leads to an ambitious and comprehensive future relationship agreement.

Through the General Affairs Council (Art. 50) and its preparatory bodies, I and my officials have been actively working with our EU27 partners and the European Commission to shape the EU's approach, including the preparation of the supplemental negotiating Directives on transition by the GAC (Art.50) adopted on 29 January. Based on these Directives, Michel Barnier reported to the GAC (Art.50) on 20 March that agreement had been reached at the level of negotiators on the text of transition in the draft Withdrawal Agreement. The European Council on 23 March welcomed this agreement but made clear that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed and that all issues in the draft Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, need to be agreed to ensure progress in the negotiations.

I welcome that the terms reflected in the draft Withdrawal Agreement are fully consistent with the EU's objective of agreeing a transition period based on the status quo. This is an approach that I strongly advocated as it will provide certainty and limit disruption for our citizens and businesses. Under such an arrangement the UK will be expected to continue to apply the full EU acquis.

As concerns the duration of such a transition, the Government agrees that in the interests of long term certainty, and to accelerate agreement on the future relationship agreement, it must be time bound. This is the overall view of both the EU and of the UK. Therefore a date of 31 December 2020 has been set for the end of the transition period and this has been reflected in the text of the draft Withdrawal Agreement. This also takes account of the EU's budgetary processes and the fact that the current Multiannual Financial Framework will conclude at the end of 2020. But equally, as the negotiations progress, the overriding objective on both sides must be to avoid any gaps and any cliff edge effects. It is therefore welcome that the General Affairs Council has agreed to keep this under constant review, taking account of developments in the Brexit negotiations. This provides the flexibility required.

Emigrant Support Services

71. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the specific actions which will be taken following the publication of the economic report on addressing the challenges faced by returning Irish emigrants; if there is a timeline for implementing the recommendations made in the report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14212/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): On foot of the work last year by the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Irish Abroad which is chaired by the Minister of State for the Diaspora, my colleague Ciaran Cannon TD, my Department commissioned an independent economic report on difficulties experienced by Irish people returning home. This report has now been completed and considered by Government, and has been published on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website. The report reviews these matters in detail and has made thirty targeted recommendations across nine thematic areas that fall under the responsibility of different Departments.

The Report has been formally circulated to relevant Departments and Agencies, and responses requested. The responses received from Departments will feed into an Action Plan, progress on which will be considered by the Inter-departmental Committee on the Irish Abroad, with the matter due to return to Government again in May.

This Government has committed to making it as easy as possible for Irish emigrants to return home. Reducing barriers to returning emigrants has important implications for national competitiveness; in a growing Irish economy facilitating the return of skills will be of importance in sustaining economic growth and will support the development of both indigenous and foreign internationally traded investment.

Human Rights

72. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the actions he plans to take to on behalf of the State to protest at the prison sentence handed to a Palestinian teenager by Israeli courts recently; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14218/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I refer the Deputy to my reply to Question no 50 today on this topic, which was as follows: The treatment of Palestinian minors under the Israeli occupation and military justice system has long been an issue of serious concern, which we have discussed here and which the Government has raised with the Israeli authorities and at EU and international level, including statements by Ireland at the UN Human Rights Council. I have expressed these concerns myself directly to Israeli leaders during my recent visit to the region in January. Despite occasional improvements on specific details, worsening aspects have been accurately tracked in reports such as those by UNICEF, referred to by the Deputy, and a recent report by B'Tselem, an Israeli NGO with whom we have contact.

For me, the bottom line is that Palestinian children are clearly subject to widespread treatment which Israel would – correctly – consider to be unacceptable for its own children.

The case to which the Deputy refers is one which exhibits many issues that concern us. Firstly, the way in which protest against the occupation can be criminalised and suppressed. Secondly the exertion of political pressure in Israel to press the military authorities to take heavy handed and highly publicised action against a Palestinian family who posed no genuine security threat. And thirdly the treatment of Palestinian minors and their families to pressure them to accept plea bargains which then supposedly justify the whole process.

I believe that the Israeli authorities should re-examine these approaches in this case and in others. Until they do so, the image of Israel and the legal system imposed on Palestinians will be gravely impaired.

Diplomatic Representation

73. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if the Irish embassy due to open in Columbia will be active in addressing human rights issues there; and if it will address the concerns of the communities along the Choco River in particular. [14052/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The decision to open an Irish embassy in Colombia, which was announced last October, is an important next step in expanding Ireland's footprint in Latin America. It represents a very positive development in Ireland-Colombia relations. While the embassy will seek to develop all aspects of the bilateral relationship, Ireland has made a particular commitment to supporting the peace process and, as a consequence, is very engaged on human rights issues in Colombia. This in-

cludes exchanges with the Colombian authorities at Government level and regular engagement with human rights defenders and civil society leaders active in Colombia. Officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade met with human rights defenders from Colombia as recently as last week, and met with those working on human rights issues in the Department of Choco in early February 2018. Since 2014, Ireland has provided funding directly to the United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights in Colombia (OHCHR) to support its vital work in promoting and protecting human rights, including in some of Colombia's most isolated and challenging regions, including Choco.

Officials at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and in our Embassy in Mexico, which is accredited to Colombia, maintain regular engagement with the EU Delegation in Bogotá, which has led on a number of visits to the Choco region, including a high level visit by EU Special Envoy to the Colombian Peace Process, Eamon Gilmore. Ireland is a founder member and one of the largest contributors to the EU Trust Fund for Colombia. We have committed to providing €3 million in funding over the lifetime of the Fund, one of the aims of which is to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable groups such as indigenous peoples and afro-descendants.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is committed to supporting peace and human rights in Colombia. Having a permanent diplomatic presence on the ground in Colombia, working with the Colombian authorities and with our EU partners, will greatly enhance our ability to meet that commitment.

Northern Ireland

74. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the timeframe for the United States Administration to appoint a special envoy to Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14152/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Successive US Administrations have provided immensely valuable support to the peace process over the last three decades. This support continues to be provided by the current US Administration, as well as by our many friends in Congress. The Government strongly appreciates the sustained engagement by the current US Administration, including by the US State Department, in relation to Northern Ireland and we look forward to this continuing into the future. In this regard, the Government has indicated that we would welcome the appointment of a Special Envoy for Northern Ireland by the current Administration, as part of its continuing support for the Peace Process. We have not received a timeframe from the US Administration regarding any possible appointment of a Special Envoy.

The Taoiseach discussed the political process in Northern Ireland with President Trump during their bilateral meeting at the White House on 15 March, and also with key Congressional contacts during his recent visit to Washington, D.C.

I also discussed the matter with Administration representatives in Washington, D.C., during my visit there last month.

Continued support and engagement by the US Administration and Congress will remain an essential support to the efforts by the British and Irish Governments, as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, to get the devolved, power-sharing institutions of the Agreement operating again as soon as possible.

Question No. 75 answered with Question No. 57.

Middle East Issues

76. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if his attention has been drawn to new legislation passed by the Israeli Knesset which may lead to the forcible displacement of thousands of Palestinians from East Jerusalem (details supplied); his views on whether this is a draconian measure that represents an opportunistic and cruel land grab which will forcibly distort the demography of East Jerusalem as an attempt to perpetuate and reinforce the Israeli occupation of Palestine; and if he will contact his Israeli counterpart to protest the passage of this new legislation. [14198/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I share the Deputy's concern about this recent legislation. Israel has already used other measures in certain cases to revoke residency rights of East Jerusalem Palestinians, quite clearly in order to alter the demographic balance of the occupied area. This is explicitly prohibited in international law, and Israel has no right to do it. The European Union issued a very clear statement on this issue on 9 March, which was as follows:

I fully endorse and repeat those comments.

Question No. 77 answered with Question No. 70.

Catalan Referendum

78. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the fact that the Spanish Government is continuing to suspend home rule in Catalonia and issues (details supplied) in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14194/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am concerned about the situation in Catalonia and the civic unrest and violence that we saw this weekend and I would join with those calling for calm at this time. I am aware that judicial proceedings are under way and that nine Catalans have been remanded in custody pending trial, and the former President has been detained in Germany on foot of a European arrest warrant. As these are matters before the courts it would not be appropriate for me to comment. The future of Catalonia is a deeply divisive and contested issue. These divisions were reflected in the results of last December's regional elections, and in the difficulties being encountered in appointing a regional President and Government. In the interim, direct rule remains in effect in accordance with the provisions of the Spanish Constitution.

I hope that it will be possible for regional parliamentarians to reach agreement on the appointment of a regional President so that a regional government can be formed. The resolution of this crisis needs to be within Spain's constitutional framework and through Spain's democratic institutions.

It is for all Spaniards – all Catalans and all other Spaniards – to shape their own constitutional, political and administrative arrangements, through their own democratic institutions and laws.

Northern Ireland

79. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and

Trade the extent to which efforts continue to be made to restore the power-sharing Assembly in Northern Ireland, notwithstanding the issues such as Brexit that have impeded progress in that area; if the attention of the UK authorities has been drawn to the dangers of allowing the internationally accepted agreement arising from the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent discussions to drift and the need to ensure that adequate cognisance is taken of the importance of continued dialogue and commitment to the peace agreements throughout Ireland and the UK and continued recognition of the importance of an international agreement signed and accepted by all parties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14199/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Over the course of many months, the Irish and British Governments, as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, have worked tirelessly to support and facilitate the parties in their efforts to form an Executive. The devolved, power-sharing institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are the best means for achieving accountable, representative decision-making for all the people of Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, to date, it has not proved possible to reach an agreement on the formation of an Executive, despite intensive engagement. In light of this, the Government has been working with the British Government to consider means by which we can support the political process, in accordance with the Agreement, in the period ahead. I will be speaking with the Secretary of State again this week and we will meet in early April.

I remain in contact also with the political parties in Northern Ireland, in working to ensure that every avenue is pursued and all possibilities are considered in seeking to secure a return to devolved power-sharing government, as provided for under the Agreement.

The Taoiseach has spoken with Prime Minister May and emphasised the Government's full commitment to the Good Friday Agreement, and our determination to secure the effective operation of all of its institutions.

As co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, both Governments have an obligation to uphold and protect the letter and spirit of that Agreement.

In the context of the UK withdrawal from the EU, the Government is determined to ensure that the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts is fully protected. The Government appreciates the solidarity and support which has been shown by all of our EU partners in respect of Ireland's unique issues and concerns, including the protection of the Good Friday Agreement. These concerns are being progressed by the EU through the Article 50 negotiations with the UK.

The Good Friday Agreement remains the indispensable framework for providing stable, inclusive, power-sharing government for all the people of Northern Ireland and for sustaining our interlocking relationships – within Northern Ireland, on the island of Ireland and between the UK and Ireland.

The Government will continue to engage to ensure the protection and support the operation of the Agreement in all its parts.

Passport Services

80. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the number of persons waiting to have passport applications processed through the Passport Office; the present turnaround time for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14216/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The

Passport Service is currently processing over 70,000 passport applications. These applications are going through the normal checking, processing and security stages. The target turnaround time for applications made via the online passport application service is 10 working days plus postage. The majority of online applications are currently being processed within 5 working days, well ahead of target. The award winning online service currently accommodates adult renewals and passport card applications and it is planned to further extend this service to other categories of renewals by the end of 2018. I would urge applicants wishing to renew their passports, whether residing in Ireland or overseas, to avail of the online passport application service where possible. The average turnaround time for renewal applications submitted through Passport Express is currently 14 working days, one day ahead of the target turnaround time of 15 working days. Other types of application submitted through Passport Express, such as first time applications or applications to replace lost, stolen or damaged passports take longer due to additional security checks.

The Passport Service operates a counter service in both the Dublin and Cork public offices where applicants who need their passport application processed in timeframes shorter than those offered by the Passport Express and online facility can be accommodated in certain circumstances. The counter service is by appointment only. Applicants wishing to make an appointment should visit passportappointments.ie

In recent weeks we had higher than average turnaround times for some categories of application owing to high application volumes and disruption caused by adverse weather conditions and the subsequent closure of the Dublin and Cork passport offices for 2 days. However, as outlined, the turnaround times have considerably reduced and in many cases are now shorter than the published target times.

My Department continues to closely monitor the level of passport demand to ensure that all resources are effectively deployed. Additional measures taken by the Passport Service include the recruitment of additional staff and the use of targeted overtime.

Human Rights

81. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the worsening human rights situation in Bahrain and the fact that the Bahraini Government is going to even more severe lengths to crack down on free speech and increase sectarian discrimination; and if he will explore options with like-minded states to challenge these worrying developments and to bring pressure on the Bahraini Government to respect human rights. [14196/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am keenly aware of the deteriorating human rights situation in Bahrain, which I have spoken on in this House several times of late. Despite repeatedly stating its commitment to improving its human rights record, the Bahraini Government appears to be targeting those who express disagreement with or criticism of the Government. A number of worrying developments suggest an increasingly restrictive attitude to those opposing or challenging the Government in any way. Statements from the Bahraini Government on its commitment to safeguarding human rights enshrined in the Bahraini Constitution are undermined by many examples of violations of fundamental freedoms, including violations of freedom of opinion and expression. Ireland's concerns about human rights issues and restrictions of civil liberties in Bahrain are regularly conveyed to the Bahraini authorities, including through the Bahraini Embassy in London and through Ireland's (non-resident) Ambassador to Bahrain. Last month, officials from my Department met with the Ambassador of Bahrain and Embassy officials in Dublin, and raised Ireland's

concerns about the human rights situation in Bahrain.

Officials from my Department also raised ongoing human rights concerns with Bahrain in the context of its Universal Periodic Review, which took place in Geneva in May 2017. In advance of this review, the Irish Mission to the UN in Geneva supported an event by the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, where human rights concerns in the Kingdom were discussed. At the Human Rights Council in Geneva earlier this month, Ireland supported an EU statement under Item 4 (Human Rights situations that require the Council's attention) which reiterated calls on Bahrain "to maintain its commitments as to the respect of freedom of speech and human rights defenders." We also made reference to Bahrain in our national Item 4 statement highlighting our grave concerns over the ending of the de facto moratorium on use of the death penalty.

Furthermore, my Department, both here in Dublin and in Geneva, engages with a number of Irish and international NGOs on human rights issues in Bahrain.

My Department will continue to monitor the situation in Bahrain, and will continue to call on the Bahraini Government to make good on their stated commitment to make progress in the area of human rights.

Brexit Negotiations

82. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the status of negotiations, particularly those relating to the Border region of counties Cavan and Monaghan, in view of Brexit and the possible re-introduction of a hard Border. [11047/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): In the context of the Article 50 negotiations, progress has been made between the EU and UK negotiating teams on parts of the Withdrawal Agreement, including on the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. The UK has agreed that a legally operative version of the 'backstop' for the border will be included in the Withdrawal Agreement, in line with paragraph 49 of the Joint Report published last December, and that this will apply unless and until another solution is found. The UK has also agreed that all the issues identified in the EU draft of the Protocol will be addressed to deliver a legally sound solution to the border issue. We have always been clear that our preference is to avoid a hard border through a wider future relationship agreement between the EU and the UK, a view we share with the British Government. We look forward to seeing the UK's detailed proposals in this regard, and proposals on specific solutions. The importance of avoiding a hard border to people living in all the border counties, including Cavan and Monaghan, cannot be underestimated and the Government is acutely conscious of this. The North South cooperation we enjoy today brings tangible benefits to the daily lives of people in the border region and contributes to economic opportunity and development. It is also a very practical outworking of the peace process which allows for the normalisation of relationships between people across the island, to mutual benefit. It is for these reasons that there cannot be a return to border infrastructure of any kind on this island.

Over the coming weeks, in addition to considering UK proposals on the border, our objective will be continue to close the remaining gaps to agree the Protocol. In this regard, the EU and UK agreed on an intensive schedule of meetings, which have started earlier this week. We expect that the Withdrawal Agreement should be finalised by October, to allow time for approval.

Ministerial Travel

83. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on his visit to China. [14023/18]

105. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on his recent visit to China; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14029/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 83 and 105 together.

I visited China from 12-17 March 2018, where I engaged in a wide-ranging St Patrick's Day programme which incorporated meetings and events with a range of political, business, cultural and Irish community interlocutors.

St. Patrick's Day offers a unique opportunity to showcase Ireland in China. The main objectives for my visit included further enhancing our bilateral political relations, making solid economic progress on both trade and investment priorities and also connecting with the Irish communities in China celebrating St. Patrick's Day.

The four-city visit began in Hong Kong, and included a meeting with the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Mrs. Carrie Lam. I engaged in meetings with Enterprise Ireland client companies, the Irish Chamber of Commerce, Hong Kong representatives of the Irish Funds network, and participated in the launch of Bord Bia's 'East meets West' Cookery competition. Finally, I attended the St Patrick's Day reception in Hong Kong, where I was joined by Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung and a range of key community, cultural and business contacts.

From Hong Kong, I travelled on to Shenzhen and Shanghai, where I met with a range of Bord Bia, IDA and Enterprise Ireland client companies, undertook media engagements, and attended both an official and Irish community St Patrick's Day receptions.

Finally, I visited Beijing, where I had a number of political meetings, including with Foreign Minister Wang Yi. We discussed a wide range of domestic and regional political and economic developments, as well as bilateral and international issues. On 15 March, I was delighted to be present at the launch of the direct flight between Dublin and Beijing, which will be operated by Hainan Airlines from June 2018 and will have a transformative effect on our relations. I participated in a range of events to promote trade and investment between Ireland and China, with a particular focus on the aviation, agri-food, financial services, education and ICT sectors. In addition, I witnessed the Greening of the Great Wall of China and attended the annual St Patrick's Day Reception which included the attendance of official, media and business contacts, as well as members of the Irish community.

The range and scale of events in China to mark St. Patrick's Day is very impressive and I was very happy with the level of engagement by Chinese authorities. My visit for Saint Patrick's Day provided me an important opportunity to pursue Ireland's interests in a major world power and the second largest global economy.

Foreign Conflicts

84. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the assertion by an organisation (details supplied) that Libya is not ready to hold free and fair elections; if this is a cause for concern in view of the EU's policy of aiding Libyan authorities to intercept migrants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14210/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland fully supports the UN Special Representative, Ghassan Salamé's, Action Plan for Libya, including efforts to form a functioning government under the framework of the Libyan Political Agreement. Holding elections is a key element of the Action Plan, and must be a priority for resolving Libya's political fragmentation. There have been some positive signs on voter registration, with 2.5 million Libyans now eligible to vote, and, notably, a strong participation rate by women. I hope that this can be translated into a high turnout in the elections. However, I understand the concerns of those who caution that holding elections precipitately may complicate, rather than expedite, a lasting political solution to Libya's governance crisis. Indeed, the UN Special Representative is conscious that there is much work to be done to lay the ground for credible elections, as he expressed in his briefing to the UN Security Council last week. Specifically, there are significant logistical challenges to holding elections in a country where armed groups control large swathes of territory, and where serious security threats persist. In addition, there are a number of constitutional and legislative measures that need to be resolved. Finally, there must be a commitment by all parties to accept the outcome of the elections.

As I have stated previously in the House, I am deeply troubled by the abuses perpetrated against migrants in Libya. My EU colleagues and I have raised these concerns on a number of occasions at the Foreign Affairs Council, as did the Taoiseach at the European Council in October. I call on the Libyan Government, and all parties, including those with de facto control of territory, to take steps to eliminate ill-treatment of migrants, and to facilitate access to detention centres by UN agencies and other humanitarian organisations.

Libya needs a functioning coastguard in order to rescue people in danger at sea. It is unacceptable that, on being rescued, migrants would be placed in inhumane conditions. The EU provides training, including in international humanitarian law, human rights and gender issues, to Libyan authorities. The EU is also working with the African Union and the UN to save and protect the lives of migrants and refugees in Libya, accelerating assisted voluntary returns to countries of origin, and the resettlement of those in need of international protection. The success of this cooperation is dependent on a Libyan government with effective, united and accountable institutions.

In sum, a functioning and stable government for all Libyans is crucial to addressing the many challenges the country faces, including ongoing efforts to improve the situation of migrants and refugees, and to ensure accountability for their ill treatment. Free, inclusive and credible elections would be an important step in this direction. I call on the Libyan Government, and all parties to the conflict, to guarantee the freedoms of assembly, association and speech, in order to foster an environment in which the democratic will of the Libyan people can be freely expressed. I am conscious that this will be a considerable test for Libya, and indeed the international community, and will require a spirit of compromise and good will on all sides. However, if successful, this would represent an important milestone in Libya's transition towards an inclusive, democratic and peaceful future.

Question No. 85 answered with Question No. 63.

Question No. 86 answered with Question No. 57.

Middle East Issues

87. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on Ireland's response to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights report on the database of all business enterprises in the occupied Palestinian territories; and if

he will make a statement on the matter. [11048/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Human Rights Council Resolution 31/36, adopted in March 2016, called upon the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to produce a database of all business enterprises involved in activities relating to Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian Territory. The EU and its member States, including Ireland, had concerns about this resolution, both because of the burden it would place on the resources of the OHCHR, and because the terms of the resolution were drawn in such broad language as to potentially include businesses with only tenuous or inadvertent connections with settlements. Despite these reservations, Ireland of course assured the OHCHR that we would cooperate fully with any request for assistance in the task they had been assigned. The OHCHR subsequently wrote to all UN Member States seeking any information relevant to the compilation of this database. In the case of Ireland the name of one company, which had been reported to have such connections with settlements, was included by the OHCHR in this request. The Government does not collect or maintain any information of its own in relation to such activities in settlements, and the communication from OHCHR gave no details of the reported activities of this company. Ireland's response to the OHCHR therefore stated that the Irish authorities did not possess any additional information in relation to that case, or the nature of any allegations against this company.

The OHCHR is understood to be in the process of communicating with companies thus identified in this initial exercise, and may issue further information when this is complete.

The Government is committed to the implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and has recently published its National Plan on Business and Human Rights 2017-2020. The implementation of this plan is a priority for the Government over the coming years, with the objective of promoting responsible business practice at home and abroad.

Middle East Issues

88. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the recent report that Israel is responsible for a 2007 air strike on a Syrian nuclear reactor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14032/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): There was never any real doubt that the 2007 airstrike on a target in Syria was carried out by Israel, and the recent declassification in Israel of information relating to it has only confirmed what was already known. My concerns about Syria are focused on the consequences of the appalling violence into which the country has descended in recent years. Any use of military force is something which Ireland would always see as a last resort. However, in view of the Syrian Government's evident and heinous willingness now to use conventional and even chemical weapons indiscriminately against its own civilian population, it is not a matter of regret that the Syrian Government's attempt to develop a nuclear programme was brought to an end some years earlier.

Good Friday Agreement

89. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on the involvement of his Department's officials in planning the commemorations for the twentieth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement; and if an all party

group is being established to discuss same. [9651/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): A programme of events is underway, at home and abroad, to highlight this important anniversary and to mark the achievement of the Agreement, which continues to be the cornerstone of our commitment to peace and reconciliation. My Department continues to engage with other Government Departments and, both here on the island of Ireland and through our overseas Embassy network, with a range of individuals, groups and institutions, who are considering and planning conferences, seminars, cultural responses, acts of commemoration and other initiatives to mark the 20th anniversary. The Government's programme will include a production called *A Further Shore*, which uses poetry, images and music to reflect on the troubled journey towards peace and reconciliation on the island of Ireland. This production will take place in London on 5th April and Belfast on 9th April. Events to mark the people's vote for the Agreement on the 22nd May are also under development. An all-island schools competition is also underway, in co-operation with the Department of Education, and a prizegiving ceremony will take place for the winners of this competition in Dublin in May.

Further events, organised or supported through our Mission network, are currently planned for Abuja, Boston, New York, San Francisco, Toronto, Brussels, Kosovo, Warsaw, Beijing, Tokyo, Geneva and Tel Aviv.

While I do not propose to establish a dedicated all party group for the purposes of marking this anniversary, I would be happy to continue to consult and engage with all political parties and other interested stakeholders and have asked my officials to do likewise.

The events marking this important anniversary will provide an opportunity to reflect on the peace process, past and present; to remember the loss of life during the years of conflict; and to look back at all that has happened on the journey of peace and reconciliation on the island of Ireland.

This journey is of course an ongoing one, and the continued imperative to work to realise the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement will form an essential part of the Government's approach to the 20th anniversary.

European Council Meetings

90. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his plans to advocate at the EU Foreign Affairs Council for the need for EU members to work together with a view to working towards a resolution to the worsening humanitarian crisis in Yemen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14203/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am extremely concerned about the current situation in Yemen, which is the world's largest humanitarian crisis. The war is now ongoing for more than three years, and has had devastating consequences for civilians, with allegations of violations of human rights, international humanitarian law, and significant loss of life. Ireland has provided over €11 million in humanitarian assistance to Yemen since 2015, and we are committed to maintaining support. In 2017, Irish funding of over €5 million was allocated to the UN's Yemen Humanitarian Pooled Fund (YHPF), which supports NGOs and UN agencies, including UNICEF, which have the best capacity to deliver services on the ground. Furthermore, the EU is the largest humanitarian donor to Yemen and has provided over €170 million in aid since the conflict began, to which Ireland contributes via the EU Development Budget. At the Foreign Affairs Council in December last year, I urged

stronger EU action on humanitarian access in Yemen, and I will continue to raise these concerns with all appropriate interlocutors whenever opportunities arise.

Ireland has also worked in the UN system to address our grave concerns about human rights in Yemen. At the Human Rights Council in September 2017, Ireland was part of a small core group of countries that drove forward the adoption by consensus of a Resolution on Yemen. The resolution established a group of international experts to examine the facts in relation to violations of human rights and humanitarian law on the ground. This group will report back to the Human Rights Council, as an important step towards accountability in Yemen.

My predecessor, Minister Flanagan, raised concerns about the conduct of the war in Yemen and the humanitarian impact with Ministerial counterparts in Saudi Arabia and UAE on a number of occasions. More recently, officials from my Department met with the Saudi Embassy in Dublin late last year, and passed on my strong concerns in relation to humanitarian access. There have also been EU contacts with Saudi Arabia on this issue.

I believe that only way to bring about a long-term sustainable improvement in the situation for the Yemeni people is through a negotiated end to this conflict. Ireland welcomes the recent announcement of Martin Griffiths as the new Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for Yemen and fully supports the efforts of UN Special Envoy and his team, who are working towards a peace agreement.

I would like to assure the Deputy that Ireland will continue to take every appropriate opportunity to urge stronger international action and will press for a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Yemen, as well as respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, and improved humanitarian access.

Question No. 91 answered with Question No. 51.

Question No. 92 answered with Question No. 57.

Human Rights

93. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has discussed the issue of the continued incarceration of a person (details supplied) in an Israeli prison and the recent ruling against an open trial with his counterparts across Europe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14031/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I refer the Deputy to my reply earlier today to Question No 50 in relation to this case, to which I would add the following: This case and its recent conclusion have not been specifically discussed at Ministerial level meetings in the EU. However, EU Missions in Palestine, including Ireland's, have cooperated closely in following and reporting on the progress of the case. Irish or other EU representatives arranged to be present at almost all of the hearings in relation to the case. The ruling against an open trial was indeed a matter of concern, although in the event it was almost immediately superseded by the conclusion of the case following an apparent plea bargain agreement.

There are of course often grounds for a case involving a minor to be held in private. But in this case the observers to be excluded would have been there largely with the consent and in support of the family.

It would be unacceptable if the operation of military justice under an occupation regime

were to exclude outside observers who are welcomed by the defendants and their families. The presence of EU and other observers at such proceedings has provided at least some degree of independent scrutiny of proceedings.

Israeli Settlements

94. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will review all trade between Ireland and Israel in view of continued illegal Israeli settlements, breaches of international law and ongoing violations of the rights of Palestinian children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14219/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government has consistently strongly opposed expansion of Israeli settlements, breaches of international law, and human rights violations, and argued for stronger international action on these matters. The specific question of applying a trade ban to exert pressure on Israel over these questions has been raised very frequently in the Oireachtas, and successive Governments and Ministers for Foreign Affairs have made it clear that they do not consider such actions would be feasible, effective, or productive, and we therefore do not support them. Ireland exists in a trading union, and our external trade frontiers and rules are those of the European Union. There is no support whatever at EU level for trade sanctions on Israel.

It is also worth recalling that the great majority of our trade with Israel is Irish goods and services sold to Israel, and that the impact of such a ban would therefore be felt almost entirely in Ireland.

Ireland has pressed for and been instrumental in the adoption by the EU of a number of measures to differentiate between EU relations with Israel and the illegal Israeli settlements in Palestinian Territory. These have included excluding settlement goods from lower tariff rates, guidelines on labelling settlement goods, advice to business and citizens about investing in settlements, and rules that prevent EU research grants from being spent in settlements. We continue to examine the scope for further such measures.

Israeli Settlements

95. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he formally raised the issue of trade with illegal settlements at the last meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14209/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Israel Palestine conflict did not feature on the agenda of the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on 19 March, having been discussed at the January and February meetings.

I have corresponded with the Deputy on the question of raising the specific aspect of trade with settlement goods. I have no difficulty with discussing this at European level, but it is a matter of judgement what is the most important and fruitful aspect to try and advance at any given time or meeting.

Ireland has already previously raised at EU level the question of whether settlement goods should be excluded from the EU market – this being a separate question from suggestions of sanctions on trade with Israel, which we do not support. In addition, the EU and its Member States are in near continuous discussion and negotiation at official level on all aspects of the

Israel-Palestinian conflict, including many which bear in some way on questions to do with settlements and settlement goods.

It is absolutely clear from these continuous contacts that there is no possibility whatever of getting substantial support, still less consensus, for a proposal to exclude settlement goods. The reality is that a substantial number of EU partners are highly resistant to such proposals, precisely because they consider them to be steps towards a trade ban, which they will not at this point countenance. Advocacy on this issue would only be likely to be counterproductive for other ideas we might pursue.

We have therefore instead focussed our efforts in relation to settlements on practical measures to differentiate in EU policies between Israel itself and the illegal settlements. This has resulted in a number of EU measures already, including guidelines on labelling of settlement goods, and exclusion of settlement institutions from EU research funding. I have, nevertheless, asked my officials to continue to explore further such options, as well as the potential for them to gain support from EU partners, and such discussions at official level will inform my continuing assessment on how best to take this issue forward.

Human Rights

96. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if his attention has been drawn to the UNHCR reports presented at the recent Human Rights Council that outline the way in which living conditions across the West Bank and Gaza have worsened in particular for children over the past year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14030/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I share the Deputy's concerns at the reports of the worsening living conditions in the West Bank and Gaza. The reports by UNHCR catalogue a number of human rights concerns that are having a particular effect on children, including settler violence, displacement and forcible transfer, home demolitions and forced evictions, and the arrest and arbitrary detention of children.

Many of these issues are linked to settlement construction and discriminatory policies favouring settlers and settlements over the rights of the Palestinian population. Ireland therefore continues to advocate for a greater international focus on these issues, and for stronger measures against settlements. The settlement project is contrary to international law, gravely threatens the prospects for a peace agreement, and inherently involves continuing and cumulative injustices and provocations to Palestinians. It is clear however that these injustices will only be fully ended when the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory is ended. I have therefore also prioritized, in my engagement at local, EU and international level, the need for continued political effort to revive a political process to end the occupation. Ireland also supports Israeli and Palestinian NGOs who are actively engaged in combatting injustices and discrimination on the ground.

During my working visit to Israel and Palestine in January, on which I have reported to the House, I expressed Ireland's concerns about the impact of the continuing occupation, including settlement construction and the treatment of minors in detention, in my contacts with the Israeli administration. In a statement on 12 January, I condemned Israel's announcement of plans for further settlement units in the West Bank.

In Ireland's national statement at the most recent session of the Human Rights Council we condemned again the continuing and accelerating expansion of Israeli settlements on occupied

Palestinian territory. We also expressed concern about the situation of Palestinians in East Jerusalem, where the historic community is under great pressure.

Question No. 97 answered with Question No. 63.

Election Monitoring Missions

98. **Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on the progress of the new election observer roster; the timeframe for its publication; and the way in which to address the flaws in the current system as articulated by participants in election observing. [14051/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): International election monitoring missions play an important role in the promotion of democracy and human rights. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade maintains a roster of election observers to facilitate, when requested, an appropriate level of Irish participation in international observation missions for elections and constitutional referendums. Irish observers participate primarily in missions organised by the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Plans are well advanced for the mobilisation of a new roster, to come into operation later this year. A public call for applications is currently being finalised and will issue in the near future. The call will be published on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website and on the Irish Aid website.

A candidate information booklet setting out eligibility requirements and detailing the process leading to the establishment of the roster will be published for the information of applicants. The process to appoint observers to the Election Observer Roster will be run in accordance with best practice.

Passport Applications Administration

99. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will provide greater resources to the Passport Office in Cork to allow for greater speed in clearing passport applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14217/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Passport Service, located in my Department, is one unified service composed of 3 constituent offices located in Mount Street, Dublin; Balbriggan, County Dublin and South Mall, Cork. The distribution of work across the 3 passport offices does not impact on members of the public or in any way or limit the options available to the public in terms of passport application channels.

Occasionally, operations are reviewed and work is redistributed between these 3 offices on the basis of demand and availability of resources. Under the current distribution of application processing across the Service, all Passport Express applications are now processed in the Balbriggan office. The Cork office processes applications from Northern Ireland and Great Britain, as well as applications submitted at Ireland’s network of Embassies and Consulates worldwide. Online passport renewal applications are processed in the Mount Street office. The public offices in Mount Street and Cork also continue to accept applications from all categories of applicant, by appointment, at their public counters. Where appropriate, these offices also facilitate the issuance of emergency passports.

My Department continues to closely monitor the level of passport demand to ensure that all resources are effectively deployed. Additional measures taken by the Passport Service include the recruitment of additional staff and the use of targeted overtime. The Passport Service received sanction this year for 220 Temporary Clerical Officers to be appointed to the Passport Offices in Dublin and Cork in accordance with application volumes allocated to each office. The vast majority of these officers are already in place with the remaining expected to be fully trained and in place by the end of March at latest. Of these Temporary Clerical Officers, 40 were assigned to the Passport Office in Cork. In addition to this, 10 Clerical Officers and 1 Executive Officer have joined the Cork Passport Office's permanent staff since the beginning of the year. Targeted overtime for was also sanctioned for all offices to increase processing capacity.

Human Rights

100. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the way in which the report on Human Rights and Business will be progressed and disseminated in order to inform Irish businesses of same. [14053/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has responsibility for the operationalisation of a number of actions set out in the National Plan on Business and Human Rights which was launched in November 2017. One of the initial tasks is to establish a Business and Human Rights Implementation Group, to consist of representatives from Government, the business community and civil society. It is envisaged that the group will meet twice a year to review implementation of the National Plan. Work is underway to establish the Group and my Department is liaising with stakeholders, including members of the business community, in this regard.

A key priority is to identify an individual with a strong track record in the promotion of human rights in a business environment to chair the Group. Preliminary work has also been undertaken to commission a baseline assessment which will complete a comprehensive study of the legislation and regulatory framework relating to business and human rights as it applies in Ireland.

My Department will convene a forum on Business and Human Rights within two years from the adoption on the plan in 2017. This will aim to bring together stakeholders including government, members of the business community and civil society to facilitate the exchange of views on progress regarding the delivery of the plan.

In addition, and in accordance with the plan, Business and Human Rights has been added as a regular item on the agendas of both the Inter-Departmental Committee on Human Rights and the DFAT NGO Standing Committee and will be discussed at upcoming meetings of both bodies.

United Nations

101. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if a major review of the United Nation's structure and principles can be undertaken with a view to restoring its effectiveness and its ability to intervene in situations such as the Syrian crisis and the development aid programmes to ensure that aid goes directly to its intended targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14200/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Secretary General has proposed reforms in the UN's peace and security architecture, in the UN's management system and structures, as well as in the UN development system – all with a view to ensuring that the UN is fit for purpose in carrying out its mandate and advancing the achievement globally of the Sustainable Development Goals. Discussions regarding these reforms are currently ongoing among UN Member States, with Ireland's central participation. Many parts of the UN system are also contributing to the reform efforts. Central to this work is the concept of sustaining peace, bringing together Governments and all national stakeholders in inclusive partnerships to prevent the outbreak, continuation, escalation and recurrence of violent conflict. In this, prevention is the top priority.

The reforms seek to reduce fragmentation and allow for better delivery, and making the peace and security pillars of the UN more coherent, nimble and effective. Ireland is deeply committed to the multilateral system, and very supportive of the UN reform efforts.

The Government is strongly committed to delivering Ireland's Official Development Assistance programme in the most effective way, providing humanitarian assistance and contributing to the fight against global poverty and hunger, including through working with multilateral partners.

The ability of these multilateral channels to reach the poorest and most fragile countries and regions in the world, and deliver real results on the ground, is at the forefront of Ireland's financing and engagement.

Ireland provides core, multi-year funding to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) which leads and coordinates the global humanitarian response and recently approved funding of €2.9 million to the organisation for 2018. This funding is intended to support the UN's ability to respond effectively to global humanitarian need, including in Syria, where UN humanitarian agencies and partners continue to reach millions of people in need. Through our upcoming role as chair of the OCHA Donor Support Group, Ireland will continue to work closely with OCHA to increase the effectiveness of the UN's humanitarian response.

An end to violence is urgently needed in order to relieve the suffering of the Syrian people. Ireland fully supports the UN-led political negotiations to end the conflict based on the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and UN Security Council resolution 2254, which call for an end to violence; full humanitarian access; a democratic political transition, and accountability and transitional justice.

Ireland plays an active role in the relevant management structures of our multilateral partners, for example as Board Members of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Population Fund this year. In addition, we use our Embassy network, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, to monitor the work of our multilateral partners on the ground and to ensure that aid reaches the targeted population.

In addition to participating in the ongoing discussions and reviews, Ireland will continue to advocate for reform of the UN's structures and systems to ensure it is enabled to fulfil its crucial role in the maintenance of international peace and security, prevention, reduction and resolution of conflict and the upholding of fundamental human rights.

Question No. 102 answered with Question No. 52.

Brexit Negotiations

103. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the status of details of the backstop agreement between the EU and the UK Government with regard to ensuring no hard border on the island of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14013/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): A Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland is an integral part of the draft Withdrawal Agreement currently being negotiated between the EU and the UK. It is drafted to give legal effect to the commitments and guarantees provided in the EU-UK Joint Progress report of last December on avoiding a hard border and protecting the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts, including North South cooperation and rights. The draft protocol also reflects the agreement reached on the maintaining the Common Travel Area. Progress has been made on the draft Protocol during the most recent round of negotiations, which concluded on 19 March. This is recorded in an annotated version of the draft Withdrawal Agreement published by the EU Taskforce on 19 March, which reflects agreement on some articles of the draft text, including the *Common Travel Area* and *Other Areas of North South cooperation*. During the negotiations, the UK also accepted that a legally operative version of the ‘backstop’ for the border will be included in the Withdrawal Agreement, in line with paragraph 49 of the Joint Progress Report agreed last December, and that all the issues identified in the draft Protocol will be addressed to deliver a legally sound solution for the border. Prime Minister May confirmed these agreements in her letter to the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, on 19 March, in addition to reiterating the UK’s commitment to agreements reached last December on protecting the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts and the gains of the peace process, including the overarching guarantee on avoiding a hard border.

I welcome that the European Council, in its guidelines adopted on 23 March, made clear that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” and has stressed that work remains to be done in order to achieve overall agreement, notably on the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. To this end, an intensive schedule of negotiations has been agreed between the EU and the UK over the coming weeks with a view to continuing efforts to narrow the remaining gaps on the draft Protocol. The European Council, with the support of the Council, will continue to follow the negotiations closely, in all their aspects, and will return in particular to the remaining withdrawal issues, including the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland at its June meeting. I therefore expect significant progress to be made in agreeing the Protocol ahead of this meeting of the European Council.

Northern Ireland

104. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has made a request to the British Government to convene an inter-governmental conference between the British and Irish Governments in relation to Northern Ireland; and if so, the proposed agenda for such a conference. [14220/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Over the course of many months, the Irish and British Governments, as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, have worked tirelessly to support and facilitate the parties in their efforts to form an Executive. The devolved, power-sharing institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are the best means for achieving accountable, representative decision-making for all the people of Northern Ireland. The electorate in Northern Ireland affirmed their support for power-sharing through the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement in May 1998 and have provided a mandate to the political parties to form an Executive and Assembly. Everyone agrees that

devolved power-sharing institutions are in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland and the Government continues to work with the British Government and the parties in Northern Ireland to support that outcome.

Unfortunately, to date, it has not proved possible to reach an agreement on the formation of an Executive, despite intensive engagement. In light of this, the Government has been working with the British Government to consider means by which we can support the political process, in accordance with the Agreement, in the period ahead.

I am in very regular contact with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in order to determine how both Governments, as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, can address the current impasse and secure the re-establishment of the Executive and Assembly. I will be speaking with the Secretary of State again this week and we will meet in early April.

As part of these ongoing discussions, I have indicated to the Secretary of State that it would now be appropriate to convene a British Irish Intergovernmental Conference in order for both Governments to formally engage through the structures of the Good Friday Agreement on next steps. The Secretary of State indicated that she wished to reflect on this suggestion and it will form part of our next discussion.

The British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference is an important institution of the Good Friday Agreement, bringing together the Irish and British Governments under Strand Three of the Agreement on matters of mutual interest within the competence of both Governments. It does not involve any derogation from the sovereignty of either Government.

Question No. 105 answered with Question No. 83.

EU Investigations

106. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the Government's position regarding the EU Ombudsman's recommendations of 9 February 2018 to end maladministration of the documents of Council; and his views on the EU Ombudsman's recommendations. [12791/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The EU Ombudsman's report follows the inquiry she opened last year on the level of public scrutiny of Council legislative work. Her recommendations go to the heart of Council decision making procedures and will require careful consideration, by both the Council of the European Union, to whom the recommendations are addressed, as well as by national Governments. The Ombudsman has asked the Council to reply within 3 months, by the 9th of May next.

While the Ombudsman's recommendations are not binding, she has recommended that appropriate new arrangements should be put in place within the next 2 years that would enable a greater range of legislative documents in Council to be directly accessible to the public, including information on Member State positions in Council Working Groups and Coreper.

The Council Legal Service is currently evaluating the Ombudsman's recommendations and will report to Member States in due course.

There is a careful balance required between transparency and the need to safeguard Member State negotiating positions in Council and later in co-decision with the European Parliament, to enable sufficient space for compromise proposals to emerge and secure support.

The issue of transparency in EU institutions is, of course, also being considered by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on EU Affairs, whom the Ombudsman met recently. I await the outcome of its deliberations with interest.

Departmental Staff Data

107. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Taoiseach the percentage of persons employed in his Department that have a disability, expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14446/18]

The Taoiseach: As at 31 December 2017, 4.6% of the staff of my Department (or 4.8% when expressed in whole time equivalent terms) voluntarily and confidentially disclosed a disability. This exceeds the minimum requirement of 3% for public sector organisations set down in the Disability Act, 2005.

Army Training Programme

108. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence if the Army Rangers participated in the recent anti-terrorist exercise at Shannon; and if not, if the Army Ranger Wing is being maintained in order to provide support for European projects such as battle groups rather than anti-terrorist operations within Ireland. [14413/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): The White Paper on Defence, published in the Autumn of 2015, considered the security environment including the threat from international terrorism. It notes that the Department of Justice and Equality and An Garda Síochána have primary responsibility for protecting the internal security of the State. The Defence Forces provide, on request, supports in aid to the civil power (ATCP) of an on-going and contingent nature.

The security environment is kept under constant review. An Garda Síochána can request a broad range of supports from the Defence Forces including the Army Ranger Wing and, in this context, the Army Ranger Wing is trained and equipped to undertake a range of specialist roles. Joint exercises are carried out in order to enhance support and ensure effective interoperability. Details with regard to the precise training of the Army Ranger Wing and their participation in exercises are not released into the public domain for security and operational reasons.

The exercise in Shannon was led by An Garda Síochána in conjunction with the Department of Justice. The Defence Forces provided assistance, as requested, by An Garda Síochána in support of the exercise.

In compliance with Government policy, the Defence Forces continue to retain a range of flexible conventional military capabilities, including Special Operations Forces, in order to meet the roles assigned and as a hedge to future uncertainty.

The Defence Forces Special Operation Force, the Army Ranger Wing, stands ready to meet all assigned roles whether in ATCP or on Government direction.

Departmental Staff Data

109. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the percentage of persons employed in his Department that have a disability, expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14436/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): Statistics are compiled by my Department and submitted to the National Disability Authority retrospectively during the first quarter of each year in respect of the previous year. The return for 2017 is currently being finalised.

This is expected to confirm that at the end of 2017 there were 351 civil servants employed in the Department of Defence of which 20, or 5.7%, had declared a disability under the definition of a disability as set out in the Disability Act 2005.

In addition to civil servants, my Department also employs civilian employees who are based in various defence installations across the country. At 31 December, 2017, there were 469 civilian employees employed of which 20, or 4.26%, had declared a disability under the definition of a disability as set out in the Disability Act 2005.

Consular Services Data

110. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the number of Irish citizens that consulates abroad have assisted following imprisonment in the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14257/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade provides consular assistance to any Irish citizen imprisoned overseas who requests our help. Our Embassies and Consulates provide direct assistance in many cases, through consular visits and practical advice and assistance to individual detainees, and our consular assistance team at HQ provides ongoing support and assistance to the families of such prisoners. We also work through our partnership with the Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas (ICPO), which receives funding from our Emigrant Support programme, to support Irish prisoners overseas and their loved ones.

Support and assistance in all such cases is provided on a non-judgemental basis, irrespective of the offence of which the citizen has been accused or convicted.

It is impossible to provide precise statistics for the number of Irish citizens detained or imprisoned overseas. In some cases the individuals involved do not seek any assistance or do not want the Irish authorities to be informed of their situations. In some other cases, regrettably, local authorities sometimes fail to notify the Irish authorities of the imprisonment of our citizens.

My Department's records show that consular assistance was requested and provided in approximately 300 cases involving Irish citizens imprisoned overseas between 2013 and 2017.

In 2013 my Department opened 55 new cases in this category. In 2014, there were 52 new cases. 2015 saw 55 new cases. 2016 saw 45 new cases, and in 2017 53 new files in this category were opened. In addition, there are a number of cases which were ongoing since prior to 2013 and for which assistance continued to be provided.

Every case is different and is considered and approached on its own merits. Some cases may last only a relatively short time, and the assistance needed may be quite straightforward. Others, such as the high-profile case of a young Irish citizen who was detained in Egypt from

August 2013 until October 2017, can be extremely difficult and complex, and can require the deployment of significant resources over a protracted period of time.

Beyond the cases where we are requested to provide direct assistance, through our partnership with the Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas, and in some cases also through other emigrant support organisations, we provide substantial indirect supports to a large number of other Irish prisoners. We estimate that, at any time, there are around 1200 Irish men and women in detention overseas and, working with the ICPO, we try to reach out and offer support to as many of these as we possibly can.

So far in 2018 my Department has provided consular assistance in 11 new cases involving Irish citizens who have been imprisoned overseas.

International Relations

111. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if the Government will expel Russian diplomats following the nerve agent attack in the United Kingdom; the information the Government has received relating to the incident; and if the Government expects a response in kind from the Russian Government to action taken. [14461/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Following on from extensive briefings by the United Kingdom at senior official level and to EU Foreign Ministers, UK Prime Minister Theresa May addressed the European Council last Thursday. She made a compelling case in support of her government's assessment that it is highly likely that the Russian Federation is responsible for the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, with a military-grade nerve agent, and that there is no plausible alternative explanation. Having listened to the Prime Minister, and to the views of other Member States in a position to support her account, EU leaders unanimously agreed with the United Kingdom Government's assessment. They affirmed that all EU Member States stand in unqualified solidarity with the United Kingdom in the face of this grave challenge to our shared security.

The use of chemical weapons, including the use of any toxic chemicals as weapons, by anyone, anywhere, is particularly shocking and abhorrent. The attack in Salisbury was not just an attack against the United Kingdom, but an affront to the international rules-based system on which we all depend for our security and wellbeing.

In light of the European Council Conclusions, and following an assessment conducted by the security services and relevant Departments, I briefed the Government yesterday on my intended course of action. At my request the Secretary General of my Department subsequently met the Russian Ambassador and informed him that the accreditation of a member of his staff with diplomatic status is to be terminated, in line with the provisions of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. The individual in question is required to leave the jurisdiction.

I want to make clear that there would be absolutely no justification for the expulsion of Irish diplomats from Russia. Our staff do not engage in activities which are incompatible with their diplomatic status. Nor has Ireland acted improperly.

EU Treaties

112. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the way in which Ireland's neutrality will be impacted in view of increasing co-operation

between the EU and NATO. [10377/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The EU's engagement with NATO is governed by the Lisbon Treaty, including the legally-binding Irish Protocol which expressly states that "*The Treaty of Lisbon does not affect or prejudice Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality*".

EU-NATO cooperation, focused on promoting security and maintaining peace and stability, is developed with full respect for the decision-making autonomy and procedures of both organisations as well as respect for the security and defence policies of EU Members which are not in NATO. Irish participation in any joint initiative would be considered in accordance with national requirements. This is compatible with Ireland's military neutrality.

The United Nations is increasingly looking to regional organisations and partners to lead international peace support missions. Development of cooperation between the EU and NATO envisages practical measures to ensure that the mandates of such peace support missions are properly implemented.

Given the focus on the promotion of peace and security, and on avoiding duplication of structures, systems and standards, Ireland is supportive of ongoing EU-NATO cooperation and coordination. This will also enhance Ireland's efforts in promoting peace and stability for our citizens.

Northern Ireland

113. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he or his Department officials have sought legal advice on the implications of direct rule on the Good Friday Agreement since the talks on Northern Ireland broke down. [8713/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Over the course of many months, the Irish and British Governments, as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, have worked tirelessly to support and facilitate the parties in their efforts to form an Executive. The devolved, power-sharing institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are the best means for achieving accountable, representative decision-making for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, to date, it has not proved possible to reach an agreement on the formation of an Executive, despite intensive engagement. In light of this, the Government has been working with the British Government to consider means by which we can support the political process, in accordance with the Agreement, in the period ahead.

I will be speaking with the Secretary of State again this week and we will meet in early April. I remain in contact also with the political parties in Northern Ireland, in working to ensure that every avenue is pursued and all possibilities are considered in seeking to secure a return to devolved power-sharing government, as provided for under the Agreement.

Both Governments have an obligation to uphold and protect the letter and spirit of the Good Friday Agreement. In the event that the devolved institutions cannot function, it is the responsibility of the British and Irish Governments to ensure that the North/South and East-West institutions of the Agreement can continue to operate effectively and in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the Agreement. The Agreement is clear that there is no derogation from the sovereignty of either Government.

The Government has consistently affirmed our unwavering commitment to the Good Friday Agreement, and determination, as a co-guarantor of the Agreement, to secure the effective operation of all of its institutions. We are continuing to engage with the British Government to give full effect to that commitment.

The advice of my Department's Legal Division is sought as required on matters relating to Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement.

Syrian Conflict

114. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his plans to speak at the next EU leaders meeting on the need for increased intervention due to the increased violence and deaths in Syria (details supplied). [9653/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): EU Foreign Ministers discussed the situation in Syria at the Foreign Affairs Council on 19 March, following discussions at our informal meeting on 15 February and at the Foreign Affairs Council on 26 February. At the Foreign Affairs Council in February, Ireland added its voice to calls for the immediate and full implementation of the ceasefire demanded by the UN Security Council in resolution 2401 adopted on 24 February. Last week, Foreign Affairs Ministers heard from Staffan de Mistura, the UN Secretary General Special Envoy for Syria, who gave us an analysis of the situation on the ground. He informed us of the limited implementation of UNSCR 2401, with the bombardment continuing in defiance of this resolution. Mr de Mistura also updated us on his efforts to bring about a negotiated political solution to the conflict. Ireland and the EU fully support his work in this regard.

The EU provides direct assistance to the UN-brokered talks in Geneva and has launched, in coordination with the UN, an initiative to develop political dialogue with key actors from the region, in support of the efforts of the Special Envoy.

The EU will also host a donor conference for Syria in Brussels in April, building on the EU-hosted conference in 2017 at which pledges totaling €5.6 billion were made. The EU and its Member States have mobilised more than €10.4 billion for humanitarian and resilience assistance in response to the crisis, making the EU the largest single donor to the effort.

The conference will focus on humanitarian support and bolstering the UN-led political peace process in Geneva. The Foreign Affairs Council in April will likely adopt Council Conclusions on Syria setting out the EU position ahead of the donor conference, and Ireland will participate in the discussions on these.

Since 2012, Ireland has contributed over €95 million to the humanitarian effort in response to the conflict in Syria, including €25.5 million in 2017 alone. Through our annual contributions to the EU Institutions, Ireland also supports the EU's humanitarian response to the Syria crisis. Ireland will announce its pledge of humanitarian support for 2018 at the EU-hosted donor conference in April.

Official Engagements

115. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on his recent trip to the United States of America and the meetings he had there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11336/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I travelled to the United States between 20-23 February last, visiting New York and Washington DC, where I engaged in an extensive programme of events which involved UN, Irish community and bilateral elements. My programme at the United Nations was focused around Ireland's candidacy for election to the UN Security Council in 2020. It included meetings with representatives of the UN Secretariat, the International Peace Institute, UN Member States and the network of Irish staff members of the United Nations. The meetings provided a good opportunity to discuss a range of issues, including developments relating to the UN Secretary-General's reform proposals and Irish priority policy areas, including peacebuilding, as well as to hear from representatives of other Member States on the wide number of policy issues of direct concern to them.

I also had the opportunity to speak at Columbia University on Ireland's response to the challenges posed by Brexit, and at Cooperation Ireland's Good Friday Agreement 20th anniversary event in New York.

On the Washington D.C. leg of my programme, my key meeting was with then-US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson. Amongst the topics which we discussed in the course of a wide-ranging discussion were the plight of undocumented Irish citizens living in the United States, the appointment of a new US ambassador to Ireland, the situation in the Middle-East, the situation in Northern Ireland, including the possible appointment of a US Special Envoy and developments on Brexit.

In Washington DC, I also met with White House Senior Adviser, Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt, Special Representative for International Negotiations, with White House foreign policy adviser Fiona Hill and with Secretary of Homeland Security, Kirstjen Nielsen.

Syrian Conflict

116. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will consider calling in the Russian Ambassador to discuss the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria and eastern Ghouta; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11337/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): It is quite clear that Russia's support for the Assad regime has prolonged the suffering of the Syrian people. Russia has also repeatedly vetoed UN Security Council resolutions on Syria, which has seriously undermined the protection of Syrian civilians. Ireland's has communicated its concerns directly to the Russian authorities on numerous occasions. In October 2017, I relayed Ireland's strong views directly to Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov. I also called on Russia to ensure civilians are protected, and to exert its influence on other parties to the conflict to do the same. These messages have also been relayed to the Russian Ambassador on numerous occasions at Ministerial and official level. My Department officials and I will continue to raise our concerns about the ongoing crisis in Syria with the Russian authorities in our interactions with them.

Brexit Issues

117. **Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on whether the UK Government has a different view than the EU and the Government as to the issues which have been agreed in regard to the EU-UK December 2017

agreement on phase one of Brexit; and if so, the areas of difference. [5420/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): A Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland is an integral part of the draft Withdrawal Agreement currently being negotiated between the EU and the UK. It is drafted to give legal effect to the commitments and guarantees provided in the EU-UK Joint Progress report of last December on avoiding a hard border and protecting the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts, including North South cooperation and rights. The draft protocol also reflects the agreement reached on the maintaining the Common Travel Area. Progress has been made on the draft Protocol during the most recent round of negotiations, which concluded on 19 March. This is recorded in an annotated version of the draft Withdrawal Agreement published by the EU Taskforce on 19 March, which reflects agreement on some articles of the draft text, including the *Common Travel Area* and *Other Areas of North South cooperation*. During the negotiations, the UK also accepted that a legally operative version of the ‘backstop’ for the border will be included in the Withdrawal Agreement, in line with paragraph 49 of the Joint Progress Report agreed last December, and that all the issues identified in the draft Protocol will be addressed to deliver a legally sound solution for the border. Prime Minister May confirmed these agreements in her letter to the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, on 19 March, in addition to reiterating the UK’s commitment to agreements reached last December on protecting the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts and the gains of the peace process, including the overarching guarantee on avoiding a hard border.

I welcome that the European Council, in its guidelines adopted on 23 March, made clear that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” and has stressed that work remains to be done in order to achieve overall agreement, notably on the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. To this end, an intensive schedule of negotiations has been agreed between the EU and the UK over the coming weeks with a view to continuing efforts to narrow the remaining gaps on the draft Protocol. The European Council, with the support of the Council, will continue to follow the negotiations closely, in all their aspects, and will return in particular to the remaining withdrawal issues, including the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland at its June meeting. I therefore expect significant progress to be made in agreeing the Protocol ahead of this meeting of the European Council.

Brexit Supports

118. **Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the attempts made by the State to secure additional funding from European institutions to mitigate the impact of Brexit. [5422/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Making the case for supporting measures at EU level that recognise where Brexit represents a serious disturbance to the Irish economy is a key pillar of the Government’s response to Brexit. This was a particular focus of my recent meeting with EU Commissioner, Gunther Oettinger, on 6 March. Commissioner Oettinger also met with the Taoiseach, Minister Donohoe and Minister of State D’Arcy during his visit, which was focused on the forthcoming negotiations on the EU’s post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which will be a key challenge and priority for the Government.

The Government’s efforts have already yielded results and it is clear that there is a firm understanding at EU level of the unique and disproportionate impact that Brexit will have on Ireland. This has already been reflected in a number of concrete measures and commitments to date, such as the European Investment Bank’s support for the Government’s Brexit Loan

Scheme.

My colleague, the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, is also working actively, with the support of other relevant Departments, with the European Commission to scope and design schemes to support enterprises impacted by Brexit in line with State Aid rules. This ongoing consultation process also provides scope to examine issues that require an approach that does not fit within the existing State Aid rules.

The Government is also working intensively to safeguard the significant financial support there has been for the border region of Ireland and for Northern Ireland, with almost €2.4 billion of EU funding having been provided for successive PEACE and INTERREG programmes. The current programmes have a combined value of €550 million over the period 2014-2020, of which 85% is funded through the European Regional Development Fund. I was delighted, therefore, that December's agreed progress report between the EU and the UK includes a specific paragraph which reflects the Irish Government's ambition to complete the current programmes and to examine favourably the possibilities for future programmes. In its communication to the European Council that accompanied the progress report, the Commission commits itself to proposing the continuation of the programmes in its proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework, which is expected in May.

Brexit Issues

119. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if it is recognised throughout the European Union that the British Government's stance on Brexit appears to be based on the UK's view that Brexit means retention of unrestricted access to the EU markets without the responsibility of commitment to the EU principles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14026/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): At its meeting on 22-23 March, the European Council adopted Guidelines on the framework of the future EU-UK relationship. These Guidelines restate the Union's determination to have as close as possible a partnership with the UK in the future. However, they also expressly state that the EU's position has to take into account the repeatedly stated positions of the UK, which limit the depth of such a future partnership. The Guidelines reiterate in particular that any agreement with the UK will have to be based on a balance of rights and obligations, and ensure a level playing field while also protecting the integrity of the EU's Single Market and Customs Union. They point out that a non-member of the Union, which does not live up to the same obligations as a member, cannot have the same rights and enjoy the same benefits as a member.

I welcome that, notwithstanding these important considerations, the EU has signalled its readiness to initiate work towards a balanced, ambitious and wide-ranging free trade agreement (FTA) insofar as there are sufficient guarantees for a level playing field. I also strongly welcome the EU's commitment to revisit its position should the UK's approach evolve.

Human Rights

120. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the Magnitsky Act; if there has been discussion on this at EU level; if it has been raised at the EU Foreign Affairs Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14321/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The circumstances surrounding the death of Mr. Sergei Magnitsky in 2009 remain deeply disturbing. From the outset, the EU called on the Russian authorities to conduct a comprehensive and independent investigation, and has criticised their failure to clarify the circumstances surrounding Mr. Magnitsky's death. A number of countries, including some EU Member States, have put in place national "Magnitsky Acts" freezing the assets of, and withholding visas from, certain Russian officials believed to have acted in violation of human rights. The question of the nature and scope of EU sanctions is always complex and difficult. The adoption of sanctions requires a unanimous decision of the Council. As the Deputy will be aware, EU economic sanctions have been in place against Russia since 2014 in response to its illegal annexation of Crimea and its further actions to destabilise Ukraine.

To date Ireland has raised its concerns regarding human rights in Russia directly with the Russian authorities and through the EU, the Council of Europe and at the UN Human Rights Council. In 2016, the Foreign Affairs Council agreed five principles to guide EU relations with Russia. Key amongst these is strengthened support for civil society in Russia, a position which Ireland fully endorses.

The question of further EU measures against Russia is likely to be considered over the coming period.

US Travel Restrictions

121. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if the case of a person (details supplied) will be examined and assistance provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14325/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I was sorry to learn of the difficulties which this person has experienced in endeavoring to travel to the United States. As the House will appreciate, US immigration procedures are a matter for the US authorities. As visa applications are subject to the relevant data protection legislation, it is the US Embassy's policy not to discuss individual cases with a third party. As such, I am not in a position to make representations to the US Embassy on specific cases.

Departmental Funding

122. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the number of St. Patrick's Day celebrations in the USA which were in receipt of State funding or support; the amount that was spent; and his views on whether it was distasteful in view of the USA's involvement in the ongoing atrocities in Syria. [14397/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): With the busy St. Patrick's Day just over, a full breakdown of the figures requested is not yet available. I undertake to provide the Deputy with the full breakdown as soon as the figures do become available. I can assure the Deputy that the reinforcement of our close historical and personal ties with the United States through the annual St. Patrick's Day celebrations in no way undermines or compromises our foreign policy priorities in other areas. In fact, the St. Patrick's Day period gives the government an opportunity each year to engage at the highest levels with the US Administration on issues of importance to Ireland.

Departmental Staff Data

123. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the percentage of persons employed in his Department that have a disability, expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14440/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): As of 31 December 2016, 3.64% of staff in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade had a declared disability in accordance with the definition in the Disability Act 2005. The 2016 figure is the most recently available and was submitted to the National Disability Authority (NDA) for inclusion in their Annual Report 2017. Figures for 2017 are expected to be available in the second quarter of this year.

Under the Disability Act 2005, public service bodies have a duty to meet a target of 3% of employees with disabilities.

Human Rights

124. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if his attention has been drawn to the increase in death sentences and the execution of prisoners in Egypt; his views on this development and continued capital punishment in Egypt; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14466/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland appreciates the magnitude of the challenges facing Egypt and we are committed to supporting Egypt in dealing with these. This weekend's bomb attack in Alexandria highlights in particular the security challenges, and I take this opportunity to extend my condolences to the families of the victims. However, a strong and stable democracy cannot flourish without full respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. Ireland and the EU oppose in principle the death penalty. We oppose and condemn its use in all circumstances. We further believe that the use of the death penalty is not only morally reprehensible, but counter-productive, both as a crime deterrent and as a punishment.

The abolition of the death penalty is one of Ireland's international priorities, and my Department regularly conveys our stance on this issue to all countries where the death penalty is still in use.

The EU and Egypt adopted partnership priorities for 2017-2020 at the EU-Egypt Association Council, which took place in July 2017. The priorities make it clear that Human rights – civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, as set out in international human rights law, the Treaty on European Union and the Egyptian Constitution – are a common value and constitute the cornerstone of a modern democratic state. They commit Egypt and the EU to promoting democracy, fundamental freedoms and human rights as constitutional rights of all citizens, in line with their international obligations.

Northern Ireland

125. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the extent to which permanent discussions may take place between all parties involved in the Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement and subsequent discussions with a view to

achieving progress on the restoration of the power-sharing Assembly and its various subsidiary bodies thereby preventing the development of a vacuum which from past experience has shown to be a destabilising factor in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14485/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Over the course of many months, the Irish and British Governments, as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, have worked tirelessly to support and facilitate the parties in their efforts to form an Executive. The devolved, power-sharing institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are the best means for achieving accountable, representative decision-making for all the people of Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, to date, it has not proved possible to reach an agreement on the formation of an Executive, despite intensive engagement. In light of this, the Government has been working with the British Government to consider means by which we can support the political process, in accordance with the Agreement, in the period ahead.

I am in very regular contact with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in order to determine how both Governments, as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, can address the current impasse and secure the re-establishment of the Executive and Assembly. I will be speaking with the Secretary of State again this week and we will meet in early April.

I remain in contact also with the political parties in Northern Ireland, in working to ensure that every avenue is pursued and all possibilities are considered in seeking to secure a return to devolved power-sharing government, as provided for under the Agreement.

The Taoiseach has spoken with Prime Minister May and emphasised the Government's full commitment to the Good Friday Agreement, and our determination to secure the effective operation of all of its institutions.

As co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, the Irish and British Governments have an obligation to uphold and protect the letter and spirit of that Agreement.

The Good Friday Agreement remains the indispensable framework for providing stable, inclusive, power-sharing government for all the people of Northern Ireland and for sustaining our interlocking relationships - within Northern Ireland, on the island of Ireland and between the UK and Ireland.

EU Agreements

126. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the degree to which all EU countries committed to the principles of the EU remain committed to the *acquis communautaire* in full; if appropriate consideration has been given to deviations therefrom and commitments to ensure adequate collegiality within the Union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14486/18]

127. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he remains satisfied that all remaining 27 EU member states remain committed in full to the EU principles; if issues have been identified as having a disruptive potential; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14487/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 126 and 127 together.

In an address I gave earlier this year on the future of Europe I spoke about the many changes

taking place in Europe. But the Deputy will be pleased to know that I was clear that there was one thing we did not wish to see changing in Europe and that is the European Union's commitment to its values. I am pleased to reiterate that now.

The Union's values are expressed clearly in article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, which says:

"The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between men and women prevail."

It is on the basis of these values that Member States engage with each other and on which the European Union engages with the rest of the world. These are the values we bring to our common policies, to our trade negotiations, to our work on peace-keeping and conflict resolution, and to our international development programmes.

Member States subscribe to these values when they accede to the Union. They are not optional. No applicant State can avoid them and all Member States are obliged to respect them.

They are an indispensable part of the *acquis communautaire* and the Treaties set out clear procedures in the event that there is a clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of these values.

Overseas Development Aid Oversight

128. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the degree to which all overseas aid agencies receiving direct or indirect aid from this country are subject to audits to ensure compliance with regulations and prevention of potential conflict of interest; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14488/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): It is a requirement of all grant agreements that partners in receipt of Irish Aid funding provide annual audited accounts. With regard to International Organisations such as UN bodies, audit requirements are laid down in international agreements. The Department usually receives audited financial statements from these bodies. In addition, with regard to the UN bodies, the Department receives the reports on internal audit activity that are presented to the executive boards. My Department also has an internal audit function that provides assurance as to the effectiveness of the Department's governance, risk management and systems of internal control, including for the Irish Aid programme. The internal audit function operates in line with the international standards for internal auditing, and its work is also reviewed by the Department's independent Audit Committee. While Irish Aid is working in some of the most difficult environments in the world, I am satisfied that the monitoring, evaluation and audit systems which we have in place provide the best assurance that development aid funding is used for the intended objectives.

Western Balkans Issues

129. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the degree to which the European Union remains committed to ongoing peaceful sup-

port and development of the western Balkans with the objective of eventual EU membership; the extent to which the *acquis communautaire* conditions continue to be met by the countries involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14490/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The European Commission presented its Strategy for the Western Balkan Countries in February 2018 and is scheduled to publish country reports in April. The Strategy confirmed the European perspective of the region, while emphasising that accession for all countries was strictly contingent on their meeting the relevant accession criteria. In particular, the Strategy stressed that the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and good neighbourly relations are fundamental. The Strategy also outlined a number of flagship initiatives that will be implemented by the EU to facilitate reform and development in the countries of the Western Balkans countries. Countries wishing to become Member States of the European Union must comply with the *acquis communautaire*. The *acquis* is the body of common rights and obligations that is binding on all the EU member states. It is constantly evolving and comprises: - the content, principles and political objectives of the Treaties;

- legislation adopted pursuant to the Treaties and the case law of the Court of Justice;
- declarations and resolutions adopted by the Union;
- instruments under the Common Foreign and Security Policy; and
- international agreements concluded by the Union and those entered into by the member states among themselves within the sphere of the Union's activities.

Candidate countries have to accept the *acquis* before they can join the EU and make EU law part of their own national legislation. Adoption and implementation of the *acquis* are the basis of the accession negotiations .

When a candidate moves into formal membership negotiations, the focus is on the adoption of established EU law. This involves preparations for applying, enforcing and implementing the judicial, administrative, economic and other reforms necessary for the country to meet the accession criteria.

The EU has opened formal negotiations with two countries in the Western Balkans: Montenegro and Serbia. Albania and Macedonia are hoping to begin accession talks this year. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are making progress on their European paths.

Overseas Development Aid Provision

130. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the degree to which he has had discussions with his EU and UN colleagues with a view to ensuring the availability of clean drinking water in all areas throughout the African continent, with particular reference to the poorer countries that have suffered as a result of war and starvation over the past number of years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14491/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Ciarán Cannon): The Government regularly engages with the EU and UN on access to basic services on the African continent, including clean drinking water. During the development of the new European Consensus on Development, a shared vision and framework for action for development cooperation among the EU and all the Member States, the Government advocated for a priority focus on basic services including safe drinking water and sanitation. The new Euro-

pean Consensus is a fundamental part of the EU's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals. Ireland, together with Kenya, led the process in the United Nations which led to agreement of the SDGs. One of those goals is access to water and sanitation. At the UN high level event held in September 2017 on the Implementation of the International Decade of Action on Water for Sustainable Development, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade highlighted Ireland's concern at water scarcity in Africa – which is increasingly aggravated by climate change.

Through Ireland's development cooperation programme, Ireland is taking a number of concrete measures to address water scarcity in Africa. Access to water is built into Ireland's bilateral aid programme. In addition to the provision of access to water, the bilateral aid programme also works to increase communities' resilience to climate change. Our humanitarian response includes a strong focus on ensuring access to basic services including clean drinking water. Ireland funds NGO-led Water, Sanitation and Hygiene programmes, known as WASH, in a number of African countries including Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania and Sierra Leone, while Ireland's humanitarian assistance channelled through the UN also funds water and sanitation needs. This support to the UN helps ensure that those living in places suffering the effects of conflict, such as Syria, or those recovering from natural disaster can get access to clean water.

I saw this myself at Nduta refugee camp in Tanzania last October: there Irish support enables water to be pumped to meet the needs of over 120,000 refugees from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. My visit there demonstrated to me both the importance of this work but also the precarious nature of access to water on which so many depended.

In partnership with University College Cork (UCC), Ireland supports the UN Global Environment Monitoring System (GEMS), which has responsibility for monitoring global ambient water quality. This €3 million programme is aimed at building the capacity of developing countries to accurately monitor and report on water quality. UCC provides capacity training.

Ireland will continue to engage in policy discussions at the EU, UN and other relevant international fora on the importance of access to clean drinking water.

Children's Rights

131. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the degree to which the EU and or the UN continue to co-operate to combat the use of child soldiers in the various wars throughout Africa; the progress to date in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14492/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Ciarán Cannon): The promotion and protection of the rights of all children should be paramount. In this context, I consider the recruitment and use of child soldiers as among the gravest human rights violations. Ireland, the EU and UN are working to end the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. The EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict, first adopted in 2003 and revised in June 2008, set out EU policy in this area. These Guidelines aim to persuade governments and organisations around the world to apply humanitarian law and human rights that protect children from armed conflict. They commit the EU to address the impact of armed conflict on children and fight against impunity for those who are involved in the recruitment of child soldiers.

Since 2002, the Secretary-General of the United Nations has issued an annual report, on children and armed conflict which lists all armed groups – both state and non-state – that recruit and use children. The most recent report, published in August 2017, cites groups operating

in eight African countries; namely the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Mali.

In 1999, the UN Security Council passed its first Resolution, UNSCR 1261, on the impact of armed conflict on children and condemned violations in that context. Ever since then, the Security Council has established vital tools to strengthen child protection and to support international standards, including the position of UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict who investigates and develops best practices to address the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

Ireland continues to combat the problem of child soldiers with a focus on addressing the socio-economic causes through our development programme. Ireland also supports direct interventions by supporting specialist organizations including UNICEF, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the International Criminal Court. Ireland's commitment to the eradication of the recruitment and use of child soldiers is highlighted in our Policy for International Development, 'One World, One Future'.

Foreign Policy

132. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the extent to which through the EU and UN, he and his colleagues therein continue to monitor and address issues of human rights, war, famine, ethnic cleansing and genocide; the areas of most concern in this regard; the action taken or pending; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14493/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Ciarán Cannon): Advancing human rights is one of the signature aspects of Ireland's foreign policy. Accordingly, Ireland is committed to strengthening regional and international multilateral human rights frameworks and has consistently made positive contributions to various regional and international human rights fora. In line with this strong history of multilateral engagement, Ireland continues to actively monitor and make interventions in relevant EU and UN fora in relation to the factors driving humanitarian crises and human suffering around the world. Through these fora, Ireland advocates for the protection of and assistance to those in humanitarian crisis situations around the globe. Humanitarian crises are complex in nature, frequently resulting in significant displacement, food insecurity, rising malnutrition levels, and serious concerns for the protection of civilians. Such crises require a coordinated response from the international community and, to this end, Ireland engages closely with our UN, EU, Red Cross and other partners. In 2016, over 75% of our humanitarian funding was provided through the UN and EU, with a similar amount in 2017. This coordinated response better enables us to reach those in urgent need of assistance and to ensure the protection of those who are most vulnerable.

Currently, some 80% of humanitarian crises across the globe are conflict-related. The fact that there are more people in need today than at any time since World War Two is due not just to the existence of the conflicts themselves, but to violations by parties to these conflicts of international law, particularly respect for international human rights and humanitarian law.

On this basis, Ireland not only responds quickly to provide humanitarian assistance where it is needed most; we also advocate at EU and UN levels to for full accountability where there have been breaches of international law, which deeply affect vulnerable people.

Foreign Conflicts

133. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the degree to which he, his EU and UN colleagues continue to monitor the situation in the various war zones in Africa in which women and girls have been taken hostage by Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab or similar organisations; the extent to which previous captives have been released and such future activity prevented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14494/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Ciarán Cannon): I remain deeply concerned by the threat to peace and security represented by terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab. These groups continue to launch attacks and commit grave human rights violations against civilian populations, particularly women and girls. The government has consistently condemned their brutal actions and we continue to work with EU and UN partners to promote peace and security and coordinate our humanitarian responses so that we can protect and assist those affected. The exact number of women and girls being held captive by Boko Haram is hard to verify and many, including girls kidnapped from Chibok in 2014, have yet to be released. During this past week, a majority of the over 100 girls recently abducted from Dapchi were returned.

Ireland and the EU remain strong and consistent supporters of peace and stability in both the Lake Chad region and Somalia, and with the support of the international community, the Nigerian Government and regional security forces have continued to make progress in the fight against Boko Haram. The EU has contributed up to €50 million in support of the Multinational Joint Taskforce, where Nigeria and neighbouring countries promote regional security.

The EU also provides considerable funding to AMISOM, the African Union-led peacekeeping mission in Somalia, to combat the serious threat posed by Al-Shabaab and support the establishment of Somalia's government institutions. The EU provides further support to capacity building operations in the areas of maritime law enforcement and military training.

We are working with EU and UN partners to implement a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of radicalisation in both regions. This includes the promotion of peace and giving people access to decent work and livelihoods, including via the EU's *Instrument contributing to Peace and Stability (IcSP)* and the *EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF)*, to which Ireland has pledged €6 million to 2020.

We continue to work with our EU and UN partners to provide life-saving assistance to those affected by the humanitarian crises exacerbated by the actions of Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram. In 2017, Ireland provided €6 million in humanitarian assistance to Somalia and €5.2 million to Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region. I expect Ireland will provide a similar level of support in 2018.

We will continue to closely monitor the evolving security and humanitarian situations through our Embassies in Nairobi and Abuja in order to coordinate our responses effectively with the EU and UN.

Syrian Conflict

134. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the steps that will be taken to address the refugee crisis in Syria and Iraq; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14495/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The situation in Syria continues to be one of utmost concern. The conflict, which is now in its eighth year, has cost over 400,000 lives. Over 13 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance

inside Syria, including close to 3 million people trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Over 6 million people are displaced internally, and a further 5.5 million have fled to neighbouring countries and the wider region. The recent increase in violence in Syria, in particular the vicious siege of Eastern Ghouta which has cost the lives of hundreds of civilians, underscores the extent to which an end to the violence is urgently needed in order to relieve the suffering of the Syrian people. Ireland fully supports the UN-led political negotiations to end the conflict based on the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and UN Security Council resolution 2254, which calls for an end to violence; release of political prisoners; formation of a transitional governing body with executive powers and a constitutional reform process. The EU provides direct assistance to the UN-led Geneva peace talks and has launched, in coordination with the UN, an initiative to develop political dialogue with key actors from the region to identify common ground. Ireland strongly welcomed the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2401 calling for an immediate ceasefire and unhindered humanitarian access on 24 February. However, the regime's bombardment of civilians and civilian infrastructure, including homes, hospitals and schools, has continued in defiance of this resolution. The international community must redouble efforts to press for the immediate and full implementation of the ceasefire, and unimpeded humanitarian access to populations in need.

Since 2012, Ireland has contributed over €95 million to the humanitarian response to the Syria crisis, including €25 million in 2017 alone. The EU and its Member States have to date mobilised more than €10.4 billion for humanitarian, stabilisation and resilience assistance inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, making the EU the largest single donor to the effort. The EU will host another donors' conference for Syria in April of this year at which Ireland will announce its pledge to the humanitarian effort in response to the Syria crisis in 2018.

The EU is also supporting the Turkey Refugee Facility in response to the almost 3 million refugees being hosted in that country, and €3 billion has been committed to this by the EU between 2016 and 2019, with Ireland contributing €22.9 million. €15 million of this has already been provided to date.

In addition, Ireland is also supporting refugee hosting communities in Lebanon and Jordan. Ireland has already contributed €9.67 million in direct humanitarian assistance to Lebanon channelled through UN and NGO partners, and €5.89 million to Jordan through the Jordan Humanitarian Fund.

Under the terms of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP), administered by the Department of Justice, Ireland has also committed to accept up to 4,000 refugees from the region. To date, almost 2,000 people have already arrived.

In Iraq, the UN estimates that 11 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, as the country begins to recover from the atrocities committed by Da'esh. The current number of internally displaced persons requiring humanitarian assistance stands at almost 3.3 million, of which 1.6 million are living outside of camps in host communities. In addition, there are an estimated 240,000 Syrian refugees in Iraq. The EU is working to support the Iraqi government on stabilisation and reconciliation.

Since 2014, Ireland has provided over €10 million in humanitarian assistance to Iraq, including €2 million in 2018 for the UN Iraq Humanitarian Pooled Fund. Via our annual contributions to the EU budget, Ireland also supports the EU's humanitarian response to the situation in Iraq.

The situations in both Syria and Iraq were discussed by EU Foreign Ministers at the Foreign Affairs Council on numerous occasions in recent months. At the Foreign Affairs Council in January, Foreign Ministers adopted the new EU strategy for engagement with Iraq, and initi-

ated a formal exchange on migration with Iraq. EU Foreign Ministers discussed Syria at their informal meeting on 15 February, at the Foreign Affairs Council on 26 February, and again at Foreign Affairs Council on 19 March, at which they had a discussion with UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura.

Through the EU, Ireland has long advocated for and supported the development of durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons, and in tackling the root causes of displacement. Through our engagement with conflict-affected countries, refugee hosting countries and our EU counterparts, Ireland supports conflict resolution and development in Syria, Iraq and the wider region.

Middle East Peace Process

135. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the extent to which ongoing efforts remain to encourage re-engagement in the peace process in the Middle East; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14496/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland, along with our EU partners, supports the achievement of a two state solution to the Middle East conflict. This support includes political efforts to encourage a resumption of direct negotiations, which are ultimately the only way to achieve peace. It also includes action on the ground on human rights and justice issues affecting Palestinians under occupation, including settlement activity, which are progressively endangering the prospects of such a peace agreement. During my working visit to Israel and Palestine in January, on which I have reported to the House, I met with both President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu, as well as other representatives of the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and discussed with them reinvigorating the effort towards peace in the Middle East. In recent months the new United States administration has been exploring the possibilities for re-launching the process to reach a comprehensive peace agreement. This engagement is very welcome, and I have met myself with the US team to encourage their work, and to underline to them the key parameters for an agreement which the EU has long espoused.

In recent discussions with my EU colleagues, I have stated that the EU must continue to encourage an appropriate US initiative, but that the EU must also continue our own work, including work on the ground, to help preserve and create the political and physical space in which the two state solution can be achieved, and help to combat negative trends, including the deteriorating situation in Gaza. I am actively exploring with EU colleagues how this can best be done.

Immediately after my visit to the region in January, I spoke directly to the US authorities, and pressed strongly for the continuation of US support to UNRWA. Ireland has provided funding of €8 million to UNRWA's Gaza Emergency Appeals since 2006, of which €500,000 was provided in 2017. In light of the exceptional circumstances UNRWA is facing, Ireland brought forward our 2018 core contribution to the Organisation's Programme Budget. Earlier this month, Ireland pledged an additional €250,000 to the Agency.

I have given these issues a high priority in my work since assuming office, both at EU level and elsewhere, as I have reported to the House.

Diplomatic Representation

136. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and

Trade if he or his officials have spoken to the Russian ambassador in Dublin. [14154/18]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): At last week's European Council meeting, EU leaders unanimously agreed with the UK government's assessment that the Russian Federation is highly likely to have been responsible for the attack in Salisbury on 4 March 2018, and that there is no plausible alternative explanation. They condemned the attack in the strongest possible manner and affirmed their unqualified solidarity with the United Kingdom in the face of this grave challenge to our shared security.

As I said in my statement yesterday, the use of chemical weapons, including the use of any toxic chemicals as weapons, by anyone, anywhere, is particularly shocking and abhorrent. The attack in Salisbury was not just an attack against the United Kingdom, but an affront to the international rules-based system on which we all depend for our security and well-being.

In light of the European Council Conclusions, and following an assessment conducted by the security services and relevant Departments, I briefed the Government yesterday on my intended course of action. At my request, the Secretary General of my Department met the Russian Ambassador and informed him that the accreditation of a member of his staff with diplomatic status is to be terminated, in line with the provisions of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

Tax Agreements

137. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if he remains satisfied that the European Commission and Council remain fully committed to the principles that taxation remains the prerogative of member states and that other means are not used to circumnavigate this principle; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14489/18]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The position with regard to legislative competence is quite clear. In circumstances where the EU Treaty does not assign legislative competence to the EU, then competence remains vested in Member States. The EU Treaty makes no explicit provision for legislative competences in the area of direct taxation.

EU legislation on the taxation of companies is therefore based on Article 115 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, which authorises the Union to adopt directives which directly affect the internal market. Any Directives made under Article 115 require unanimity among all Member States.

Therefore a Member State retains sovereignty over any tax area not governed by a Directive. Most importantly Member States define their own tax bases and retain the right to bilateral approaches on tax matters.

Carbon Tax Yield

138. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of solid fuel carbon tax that was collected each year since the introduction of this tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14293/18]

139. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the number of prosecutions that have been taken since the introduction of the carbon tax on solid fuels for non-payment or non-declaration of tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14294/18]

140. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the number of entities that have made returns for payment of the solid fuel carbon tax; if solid fuels are imported from Northern Ireland for resale; if the responsibility to register for carbon tax lies with the importer of these goods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14295/18]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 138 to 140, inclusive, together.

Carbon tax was first introduced in Ireland in 2010 as a charge on fossil fuels based on the amount of carbon dioxide emitted on combustion. Initially, carbon tax applied to certain oil and gas fuels and was charged at a rate of €15 per tonne of carbon dioxide emitted from the fuel concerned. The application of carbon tax to solid fuels was delayed to allow for the development of a robust mechanism to counter the large scale sourcing of coal from Northern Ireland where lower sulphur standards apply. Such a mechanism is in place since June 2011.

In May 2013, carbon tax was extended to solid fuels with the introduction of Solid Fuel Carbon Tax (SFCT). SFCT was charged at an initial rate of €10 per tonne of carbon dioxide emitted when combusted. In 2014 the rate for all carbon charges was increased to €20 per tonne of carbon dioxide emitted. Current SFCT rates per tonne are €52.67, €36.67, €17.99 and €27.99 respectively for coal, peat briquettes, milled peat and other peat.

I am advised by Revenue that from May 2013 to the end of 2017 net receipts from SFCT amounted to €91.6m. Currently there are 210 active SFCT registrations. Annual SFCT net receipts are given in the following table.

Year	€m
2013	7.3
2014	17.2
2015	23.5
2016	24.4
2017	19.1
	91.6

SFCT applies on the first supply of coal and peat in the State and is payable, on a bi-monthly basis, by a taxable person who is registered for VAT and making a first supply. Every supplier who intends to make a first supply of solid fuel in the State must register with Revenue.

Suppliers in the State who import solid fuel and make first supplies in the State are required to register for SFCT. Importers of solid fuel that is exclusively for their own use (self supply) for the purposes of manufacturing are also required to be registered for SFCT. The obligation to register with Revenue for the purposes of SFCT also applies to suppliers based in Northern Ireland who deliver solid fuel into the State for sale direct to the public. In this context, I am advised by Revenue that a number of Northern Ireland based suppliers are registered for SFCT.

It should be noted that SFCT is not payable by a Northern Ireland supplier where that supplier makes the supply at their premises in the North, nor is it payable by private individuals travelling to the North to buy solid fuel for personal consumption if the individual accompanies the fuel back into the State. It should also be noted that European Union Single Market constraints preclude the use of any cross-border movement controls in the administration of SFCT. Therefore, Revenue has no authority to stop vehicles and physically inspect loads of solid fuel. Similarly, the transport or possession of solid fuel that originated in Northern Ireland are not, in themselves, Revenue offences and Revenue's officers have no authority to challenge such transportation or possession.

Revenue collects SFCT on a self-assessment basis and enforces compliance by way of audit of solid fuel carbon tax returns. Liable fuel suppliers must file a return and pay for each bi-monthly period by the last day of the following month. Where suppliers do not submit returns by the due date Revenue will issue an estimate of the tax due. The estimate is the amount of tax that Revenue will pursue if a supplier does not complete and file their return.

If a taxpayer fails to pay the amount due, including any debt for which an estimate has issued, Revenue may refer the debt for enforcement action. This can include sheriff enforcement, civil proceedings through the courts or attachment of third parties. To date SFCT enforcement actions have included;

- 35 warrants issued to Revenue Sheriffs with a total value of €461,794
- 45 solicitor referrals amounting to €116,670
- 1 Notice of Attachment issued for the amount of €32,567.

SFCT collection is heavily reliant on the regulatory regime covering the marketing, sale, distribution and burning of solid fuels in the State. This regulatory regime is operated by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and enforced by local authorities. I am advised by Revenue that it is in ongoing contact with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment in relation to this area.

Revenue Commissioners Audits

141. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Finance the number of external reviews which have taken place in the Revenue Commissioners in respect of taxes due; and the number of these reviews that have resulted in repayments to taxpayers as a result of external reviews in each of the past five years. [14338/18]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that external reviews are undertaken under Revenue's Complaint and Review Procedures, which are contained in Leaflet CS4. These Procedures were introduced on 1 January 2013 and provide customers with a mechanism for making a complaint and seeking a review of Revenue's handling of a case. It is a three stage process with stages 1 and 2 being dealt with in the Local/Regional/Divisional Office. The final stage, stage 3, can be invoked if the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of stages 1 and 2. The complainant can seek a stage 3 review to be conducted by either an Internal Reviewer or an External Reviewer, but not both. The Internal or External Reviewer conducts a review of the stage 2 decision and Revenue will be bound by the outcome of the Review Procedures, unless in their view the decision of the Reviewer is not in accordance with the relevant legislation.

Since the Procedures commenced 65 External Reviews have been completed to end-2017. Of these, 8 were decided in favour of the complainant and 11 had the original decision revised or partially revised – see table:

External Reviews

Year	Decision against the complainant	Decision in favour of the complainant	Decision revised/partly revised	Discontinued	Total
2013	7	-	1	-	8
2014	9	4	3	-	16
2015	9	2	2	-	13
2016	12	-	1	-	13
2017	8	2	4	1	15
Total	45	8	11	1	65

An analysis of the total number of external reviews shows that 16 related to taxes due and of these 7 related to refunds of taxes. Of these 7 only 1 was found in favour of the complainant and this resulted in a refund to the taxpayer.

Tax Code

142. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the tax rules surrounding the early extraction of pension funds, specifically if a person wishes to extract funds from their pension and invest it directly in sovereign bonds; if such a transaction is taxed; if the person wishes to transfer the funds to another registered pension fund if it would be subject to exit tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14370/18]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that approval of occupational pension schemes under the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 is given on the basis that retirement benefits are generally paid at normal retirement age which cannot fall before age 60. Approval may also provide, however, for early retirement from age 50 where scheme rules allow and with the employer's consent. In such situations benefits are restricted. In the case of approval of personal pension arrangements such as retirement annuity contracts (RACs) and Personal Retirement Savings Accounts (PRSAs) benefits can be taken from age 60, with early retirement permitted in certain circumstances. In relation to all of these pension arrangements, benefits can be taken at any stage where retirement is due to serious ill-health or incapacity. I am also advised that access by an individual to his or her pension funds prior to retirement, either generally or for the purpose of investing directly in sovereign bonds, is not permitted under the rules governing the approval of pension arrangements for tax purposes.

Under the conditions of approval for occupational pension schemes, an individual's entitlements under a scheme may be transferred to another such scheme, an approved buy-out bond or a PRSA. A transfer from an occupational scheme to a PRSA is permitted only if the individual has been a member of the scheme or of any other scheme related to that individual's employment with, or with any person connected with, the employer for less than 15 years. In the case of personal pension arrangements, an individual's entitlements may be transferred from a RAC to a PRSA and from a PRSA to another PRSA or an occupational pension scheme. A transfer of entitlements from an approved pension arrangement to another such arrangement is not subject to tax where the transfer is made in accordance with conditions applying to the approval of the arrangements in question.

Motor Tax Exemptions

143. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance the status of a refund for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14409/18]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that all vehicles that are type approved are required to be registered under the provisions of the Finance Act 1992, Part II, Chapter IV. This includes “quads” that are approved for use under the provisions of Regulation (EU) No 168/2013 “on the approval and market surveillance of two- or three-wheel vehicles and quadricycles”. The VRT charge is based on the cubic centimetres of €2 per cc up to and including 350cc and €1 per cc thereafter, with a depreciation allowance for the age of the vehicle. Revenue collects this tax when a vehicle is registered.

The vehicle in question was required to be registered as it had been type approved and the correct VRT was charged and collected at the time of registration. The VRT, €495, was calculated on the basis of the cubic centimetres including an element of depreciation because of the age of the vehicle.

As advised in the correspondence of 28 February 2018 from the Tralee Revenue Office, there are a number of reliefs and exemptions from the tax provided for in the Finance Act 1992, section 134 (permanent reliefs such as transfer of residence, bequest, diplomatic etc.) and section 135C (remission or repayment for hybrid and electric vehicles). On the basis of the information provided, the case notified does not qualify for any of these reliefs or exemptions. If there are further reasons why the vehicle should qualify for a refund, these should be advised to the Tralee Revenue Office along with any documentation in support of the claim being made.

Departmental Staff Data

144. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance the percentage of persons employed in his Department who have a disability expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14439/18]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy is aware, the Disability Act 2005 sets out the legal obligations of public service bodies and includes:

- the promotion and support of the employment of people with disabilities
- compliance with any statutory Code of Practice
- meeting the target of 3% of employing people with disabilities and
- reporting annually on the achievement of these obligations.

The Department of Finance adheres to its requirements as set out by Disability Act of 2005. The Department has a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) in place who works closely with the National Disability Authority (NDA) to ensure that the Department is fully compliant with its obligations under the Act. All new entrants complete a confidential disability survey which is forwarded to the DLO for actioning, where appropriate. These declarations are amalgamated with an annual survey and forwarded to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as part of our annual returns who collate centrally Department/Office annual returns for forwarding to the National Disability Authority (NDA) for publication on their website.

Bi-monthly Disability Liaison Officer Network meetings are held to share knowledge and assist other DLOs across the Civil Service, as well as engaging with staff in accessing training

and learning events, where needed. During 2016/17, a major refurbishment project was undertaken by the OPW here in Government Buildings on Merrion Street. As part of that project, for example, electronic doors were installed to assist the movement of staff across our campus.

In terms of communicating with persons with disabilities who need assistance with accessing information, the Department has an Access Officer for Information and contact details are available on the Department's website (*www.finance.gov.ie*).

During 2017, the Department satisfied the 3% target of employing staff with disabilities and the Department is aware of the increase in the targets to be achieved over the next number of years and is committed to achieving these revised targets.

The following table sets out the percentage of employees with a disability for the years 2014 to 2017. Disability statistics for 2018 will be collated in March 2019.

Year	Staff employed	No of employees with disabilities	% of employees with disabilities
2014	321	11	3.42
2015	304	15	4.93
2016	301	9	3
2017	320	13	4.06

Credit Ratings

145. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Finance the rules surrounding records on individual credit ratings, specifically if a person's credit rating was affected due to the fact that they were the victim of a scam (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14476/18]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Central Credit Register has been established by the Central Bank of Ireland under the Credit Reporting Act 2013. It was developed to collect and centralise specified credit and personal information on loans and other relevant credit facilities.

The Central Bank has advised that the Central Credit Register is being implemented on a phased basis. Phase 1 included the submission of information on consumer loans such as credit cards, mortgages, personal loans and overdrafts, and this information is now being submitted on a monthly basis. Phase 2 commences on 31 March 2018 and includes the submission of information on moneylender loans, and business loans. No information on deposit accounts is included on the Central Credit Register.

Section 9 of the Act provides that a credit information subject (or credit information provider) may make an application to amend information on the Register on the grounds that it is inaccurate, incomplete or not up-to-date and where the Central Bank decides that the information should be amended it shall do so. Section 13 of the Act also provides that a credit information subject may give a statement relating to any information on the Register which relates to the credit information subject.

The Central Bank has also advised that Section 30 of the Act provides that the Bank may produce credit scores and other analyses. However, as credit reports only became available on 20 March, it is not the intention of the Central Bank to consider the production of credit scores until a practical period of experience has been accumulated.

Wards of Court

146. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 87 of 28 February 2018, his plans to provide for public oversight of the auditing of the funds of wards of court in the absence of an amendment to the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993. [13634/18]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, wardship funds are not public funds but rather are funds subject to the control and supervision of the High Court. Arrangements for the oversight of such funds is, therefore, a matter for the Courts themselves as supported by the Courts Service.

The Courts Service has informed my colleague the Minister for Justice and Equality that it is standard procedure for funds of Wards of Court to be brought under the custody of the court for investment by the Accountant of the Courts of Justice in accordance with the directions of the President of the High Court and the Registrar of the Office of Wards of Court. The Courts Service has advised that there are substantial oversight arrangements in place in relation to the investment of funds of wards of court by the Courts.

Governance arrangements for the oversight of court funds were put in place following a comprehensive external review in 2001 carried out by Mercer Investment Consultants. One of the recommendations concerned the establishment of an Investment Committee. The investment expertise is provided by independent investment consultants, who are contracted to work with and support the Investment Committee in all its oversight and decision making functions.

Investment of court funds is carried out in line with the strategies devised and reviewed on a regular basis by the Investment Committee, chaired by the President of the High Court. The Investment Committee reviews the investment strategies with the assistance of its investment advisors to ensure the protection and suitable investment of funds of wards, minors and others lodged in court for the benefit of those persons. Investment policies and orders made thereunder must be in accordance with the Trustee (Authorised Investments) Act 1958.

The Courts Service has further advised that a prudent approach to investing court funds is adopted and takes only measured and appropriate risks, based on independent investment advice, in the best interests of all beneficiaries. The Courts Service has also advised my Department that the independent review recently carried out by Mazars, and the review carried out by Aon Hewitt in 2016 as well as the annual independent external audits over many years has not raised any significant issues of concern in relation to the management of wardship funds.

Heritage Centres Data

147. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the OPW heritage facilities which are staffed by tour guides but which do not have parking or toilet facilities for visitors. [14306/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): The following table sets out the position at certain visitor sites where either public carparking or public toilets or both are not provided by OPW. All other Visitor sites within the portfolio have both Toilets and Carparking provided.

Site	PublicToilets	PublicCar-parking	Comments
Charles Fort, Kinsale	Yes	No	Public car-park adjacent to the site
Ardfert Cathedral	No	No	Public parking close to site.
Gallarus Oratory and Castle, Kerry	No	No	Car-parking and toilets provided at privately owned visitor centre
Listowel Castle	No	No	Public parking, toilets in adjacent Writers Centre
Ross Castle, Killarney	Yes	No	Car-parking on park lands, toilets in the curtilage of the monument but maintained by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Cultural, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
Skellig Michael	No	No	Toilets and Carparking provided at privately-run Visitor Centre in Portmagee, main departure point for the Island; toilets provided on all Boats by Private Boatmen.
Kells Priory, Kilkenny	No	No	Small car-park on privately lands adjacent to the site
St Marys Gowran	Yes	No	Public parking close to site.
Adare Castle	No	No	Toilets and carparking provided in Adare Heritage Centre.
Desmond Castle New-castlewest	Yes	No	Public parking close to site.
Cahir Castle	Yes	No	Public parking close to site.
Main Guard, Clonmel	Yes	No	Public parking close to site.
Ormond Castle, Carrick on Suir	Yes	No	Public parking close to site.
Rock of Cashel	No	No	Public parking close to site; OPW contributes a maintenance fee to Council for public toilets.
Roscrea Heritage and Damer House	Yes	No	Public parking close to site.
Dungarvan Castle	Yes	No	Public parking close to site.
Reginalds Tower, Waterford	No	No	Public parking close to site.
Ballyhack Castle, Co. Wexford	No	No	Public parking close to site.
Ennis Friary	No	No	Public toilets/car/coach parking close to site.

Questions - Written Answers

Site	PublicToilets	PublicCar-parking	Comments
Scattery Island, Kilrush	Yes	No	Car parking available in Kilrush Marina, departure point for Visitor travel by ferry to Scattery Island.
Donegal Castle	Yes	No	Public parking close to site.
Kilmainham Gaol	Yes	No	Public parking/drop off and pick up by coach operators.
St. AudeonsChurch, Dublin	Yes	No	Public parking/drop off and pick up by coach operators.
Athenry Castle	Yes	No	Public car/coach parking close to site.
Dún Aonghusa, Aran	Yes	No	Public parking available at Rossaveal / Connemara Airport; departure points for travel by ferry/ plane to Inishmore.
Portumna Castle and Gardens	Yes	No	Public car/coach parking close to site.
Maynooth Castle	No	No	Public parking close to site.
Parke's Castle, Co. Sligo	Yes	No	Public car/coach parking close to site.
Hill of Tara, Co. Meath	No	No	Public Parking, OPW provide support to Meath Co. Co. for public use of toilets by local operative.
Knowth, Co. Meath	Yes	No	Visitors do not travel to site directly; Shuttle bus service provided from Brú na Bóinne.
Loughcrew, Co. Meath	No	Yes	
Trim Castle, Co. Meath	Yes	No	Public car/coach parking close to site.
Boyle Abbey, Boyle	Yes	No	Public car parking close to site.
Sligo Abbey	Yes	No	Public car parking close to site.
War Memorial Gardens, Dublin	No	Yes	
Kilkenny Castle	Yes	No	Public car/coach parking close to site.
Swiss Cottage, Cahir	Yes	No	Public car/coach parking close to site.
Dublin Castle	Yes	No	Public car parking close to site.
St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin	No	No	Site Closed currently for works.
Casino, Marino	No	No	Public car parking close to site; site closed currently for works.

Site	PublicToilets	PublicCar-parking	Comments
War Memorial Gardens, Dublin	No	Yes	
Grangegorman Cemetery, Dublin	No	Yes	
Arbour Hill Cemetery, Dublin	No	No	Public parking available close by.

Recreational Facilities

148. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will proceed with a playground at a location (details supplied) for which planning permission was obtained some time ago. [14307/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): There are no plans to proceed with the development of a playground at Old-bridge Estate, County Meath. While Planning Permission for a playground was granted in September 2011, it expired in November 2016. The development did not proceed due to a lack of funding resources at the time and a request for a financial contribution from local authority (Meath County Council) was declined.

Flood Relief Schemes Data

149. **Deputy Shane Cassells** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the applications submitted to the Office of Public Works by Kilkenny County Council in each of the past three years to address major flooding problems and under the minor works flood relief fund; if the local authority can submit minor works applications for areas included in the CFRAM reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14360/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): Kilkenny County Council has written to the Office of Public Works in relation to the report it commissioned from Arup Engineering on individual property protection to address the flooding problems at Graiguenamanagh and Thomastown. Initial discussions have taken place between the Council and the OPW in relation to the report. The matter will be considered and discussed further between the two bodies with a view to agreeing the best way to deal with the flooding problems in the town. This consideration will have to have regard to the proposals for permanent flood relief schemes for the two towns included in the Flood Risk Management Plan under the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme.

The Flood Risk Management Plans under the CFRAM Programme have been submitted by the Commissioners of Public Works to the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform for approval. These Plans, which were widely consulted on locally, include other proposed projects for County Kilkenny (in addition to Graiguenamanagh and Thomastown) at Freshford, Inistioge, Piltown and Ballyhale. The implementation of larger projects in the Plans will be carried out on a phased and prioritised basis to be announced. However minor projects in the Plans which fall within the financial threshold of the Minor Works scheme, that is, up to an estimated cost of €750,000, and on approval of the Plans by the Minister, can be progressed by the Local Authorities with full funding from the OPW. Ballyhale falls within this category. If there are other localised minor works identified by Local Authorities within the areas covered by the CFRAM Plans then it is open to the Local Authorities to submit applications under the

Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection scheme for those works. All applications will be considered within the criteria of the scheme.

Please see listed in tabular form the applications submitted under the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection scheme by Kilkenny County Council in 2016, 2017 and 2018 to date.

Minor Works Scheme 2016- 2018

Project Location	Project Details	Approved Funding	Date of Approval/ Application
Knockhouse to Port-nascully	Study	€9,000	2016
Fanningstown and Owing	Study	€9,000	2016
Parksgrove, Ballyragget	Flood Alleviation Works		Under consideration 2018

Departmental Staff Data

150. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the percentage of persons employed in his Department that have a disability, expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14444/18]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The information requested by the Deputy is set out in the following table.

Each year, in accordance with the Disability Act 2005, the Department submits a report highlighting the percentage of staff within the department who have self-declared a disability. This information for all Departments and Offices is collated centrally by the Civil Service HR Policy Division within my Department and forwarded on to the National Disability Authority (NDA) for publication on their website. Statistical information from 2011 to 2015 for all Public Sector bodies can be found on their website at:

<http://nda.ie/Publications/Employment/Employment-of-people-with-disabilities-in-the-public-service/>

The last submitted report highlighting the percentage of staff within the department who have self-declared a disability for my Department was compiled on the 31st of March 2017 covering the year 2016. This information has not yet been published on the NDA website. However, I have included this in the table.

Disability statistics for the year 2017 are currently being collated.

Year	Department	Total Employed	No of employees with disabilities	% of employees with disabilities
2011	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform	309	20	6.5%
2012	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform	369	15	4.1%

Year	Department	Total Employed	No of employees with disabilities	% of employees with disabilities
2013	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (inclusive of National Shared Services Office and Office of Government Procurement)	507	22	4.3%
2014	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (inclusive of National Shared Services Office and Office of Government Procurement)	870	30	3.4%
2015	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (inclusive of National Shared Services Office and Office of Government Procurement)	1060	54	5.1%
2016	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (inclusive of National Shared Services Office and Office of Government Procurement)	1189	52	4.4%

School Staff

151. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on a matter in relation to a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14308/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The criteria used for the allocation of teaching posts is published annually on the Department website. The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September.

The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally irrespective of location.

The staffing schedule also includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing

appeal under certain criteria to an independent Appeals Board. Details of the appeal process and application form are available in Circular 0010/2018, “Staffing Arrangements in Primary Schools for the 2018/19 School Year”, which is published on the Department website.

The school referred to by the Deputy submitted an application for consideration by the Appeals Board at its March meeting under Criterion A – “Exceptional Accommodation Difficulties”. The Appeals Board considered the appeal and determined that it did not warrant the allocation of an additional post under Circular 0010/2018.

The school has been notified of the outcome of the appeal. The Appeals Board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final.

School Transport

152. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the minimum amount of children needed for a school bus service, either to establish or retain a service. [14309/18]

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 over 116,000 children, including almost 12,000 children with special educational needs, are being transported in over 4,500 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres annually at a total cost of almost €190 million in 2017.

The purpose of the 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.

In general, children are eligible for school transport if they meet the distance criteria and are attending their nearest school.

Distance eligibility is determined by Bus Éireann by measuring the shortest traversable route from the child’s home to the relevant school.

Under the terms of the scheme a minimum number of 10 eligible children residing in a distinct locality, as determined by Bus Éireann, are required before consideration may be given to the establishment or retention of school transport services, provided this can be done within reasonable cost limits.

For school bus operating purposes a “distinct locality” is a cluster of eligible children who reside in the same general area, in the same general direction from the school attended, as determined by Bus Éireann taking cognisance of the local road network. A service to convey a group of children whose homes are at scattered points in a school district would not be considered.

The terms of the School Transport Scheme are applied equitably on a national basis.

Summer Works Scheme

153. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the summer works scheme will open for applications for summer 2018; and if he will make a statement

on the matter. [14330/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The current Summer Works Scheme (SWS) 2016 -2017 was applied on a multi-annual basis. The Deputy will be aware that nearly 50% of schools have applied for inclusion under the scheme which reflects a very high demand.

Almost €80 million has been approved to date under the Summer Works Scheme, in respect of over 640 school projects in categories 1-6. Details of the successful school applicants are published on my Department's website www.education.ie.

The 2018 budgetary provision will allow my Department to meet the carry over costs of summer works projects already approved. The assessment of applications in the remaining categories 7-10, as well as proceeding with any future summer works scheme, is reliant on the availability of funding.

Special Educational Needs Data

154. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the percentage of children with complex special educational needs such as autism spectrum disorder; if it is safe to include them in a mainstream class in primary school; if there is a requirement of balance between children with and without special educational needs in classrooms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14334/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The policy of this Department is to ensure that all children with special educational needs can be provided with an education appropriate to their needs.

This Department provides for a range of placement options and supports for schools, which have enrolled students with special educational needs, in order to ensure that wherever a child is enrolled, s/he will have access to an appropriate education.

Where possible, provision is made for the inclusive education of children with special educational needs. Department policy is that children with special educational needs should be included where possible and appropriate in mainstream placements with additional supports provided. In circumstances where children with special educational needs require more specialised interventions, special school or special class places are provided for.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is an independent statutory body whose functions include planning and co-ordinating the provision of education and support services to children with special educational needs in conjunction with schools and the Health Service Executive (HSE). The NCSE, through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), is responsible for processing applications from schools for special educational needs supports as required, once a child has been enrolled in a school.

The NCSE is also responsible for the establishment of special classes in mainstream primary and post primary schools. Special classes offer a supportive learning environment to students who are unable to access the curriculum in a mainstream class, even with support, for most or all of their school day. Special classes are for students who have a recommendation for a special class placement in their professional reports.

Autism is a spectrum disorder the characteristics of which can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations and can range from mild to severe. The NCSE's Autism Policy Advice,

published in 2015, did not recommend any restriction or limits on the numbers of children with Autism which could be present in one mainstream class, nor did they identify any criteria which might indicate a need for such limitations.

Circulars 0013/2017 for primary schools and 0014/2017 for post primary schools, published on 7th March 2017, 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 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.

The provision of a profiled allocation is designed to give a fairer allocation for each school which recognises that all schools need an allocation for special needs support, but which provides a graduated allocation which takes into account the actual level of needs identified in schools through the identification process.

This means that, where there are a higher number of children with special educational needs in a school, the school will receive a higher level of supports to support those children.

Special Educational Needs Service Provision

155. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a special needs unit in a school (details supplied) will open in September 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14335/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): This Government is committed to ensuring that all children with Special Educational Needs, including those with autism, can have access to an education appropriate to their needs, preferably in school settings through the primary and post primary school network.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is an independent statutory body whose functions include planning and co-ordinating the provision of education and support services to children with special educational needs in conjunction with schools and the Health Service Executive (HSE).

The NCSE, through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), is responsible for processing applications from schools for special educational needs supports as required, once a child has been enrolled in a school. The NCSE is aware of emerging need from year to year and where special provision is required it is planned and established to meet that need, including the establishment of special classes in mainstream primary and post primary schools.

Special classes offer a supportive learning environment to students with ASD who are unable to access the curriculum in a mainstream class, even with support, for most or all of their school day. Special classes are for students who have a recommendation for a special class placement in their professional reports.

The NCSE, in looking to open special classes, must take into account the present and future potential need for such classes, taking particular account of the educational needs of the children concerned. The NCSE will also take account of location and sustainability in looking to establish special classes in certain areas.

In addition, the NCSE will consider:

- the school's accommodation and accessibility
- the number of special classes, if any, already in the school.

In order to identify need in any area for the forthcoming school year, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) refer to professional reports indicating students require the support of a special class. In this regard parents/guardians of students with ASD seeking a special class placement should provide the relevant professional report to their local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) to inform the planning process.

The report must state that:

- S/he has ASD
- S/he has significant learning needs that require the support of a special class setting and the reasons why this is the case.

The NCSE has advised officials in my Department that 2 new ASD Primary classes will be established in Firhouse Educate Together N.S for the forthcoming school year.

The Department continues to work with the NCSE to ensure that there is appropriate planning in place to ensure that all children who require special class placements can access such placements in schools within their communities.

In addition to 2 special classes, the special education teaching allocation provided for 2017/18 was maintained at the allocation that the school, referred to by the Deputy, received in the previous school year. In October 2017, the school was provided with an additional SEN allocation of 2.45 hours on the grounds that the school qualified for one additional developing mainstream teaching post. The school has now received a revised total special education teaching allocation which equates to over 2 full time additional Special Education Teachers. This is a very significant allocation for a school of this size, which has a current enrolment of 169 pupils.

DES Circular 0013/2017 for primary schools and 0014/2017 for post primary schools were published on 7th March 2017 which set out the details of the new model for allocating special education teachers to schools.

Question Heading for question(s) 156

156. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education and Skills further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 206 of 13 February 2018 and 259 of 27 February 2018, if he will provide a reply to the issue raised; if his office has been contacted by the Ceann Comhairle regarding the question; if he has consulted with the Secretary General of his Department on this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14346/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): A response in this regard has issued to the Deputy.

Oibreacha Feabhsúcháin do Scoileanna

157. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den Aire Oideachais agus Scileanna maidir le ceist 190 ar 3 Deireadh Fomhair 2017, an dtabharfaidh sé soiléiriú maidir le stádas an iarratais atá déanta ag an scoil (sonraí tugtha), go háirithe ós rud é gur chuir an scoil an soiléiriú ar na costais a bhí iarrtha ag an Roinn isteach an 29 Meitheamh 2017; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [14372/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): Cheadaigh mo Roinn deontas suntasach cineachta i mí Mheán an Fhómhair 2014 don scoil atá i gceist le haghaidh síneadh buan agus oibreacha athchóirithe a d'éascódh le gach foirgneamh réamhdhéanta a bhaint ó shuíomh na scoile.

Tá mo Roinn ag fanacht le tuilleadh faisnéise maidir le plean costas athbhreithnithe. Déanfar an cheist a scrúdú níos mó nuair a fhaigheann mo Roinn an t-eolas agus nuair a dhéanfar measúnú air.

Special Educational Needs Service Provision

158. **Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the supports in place to help students with dyslexia go to third level education; and the allowances for the condition made in terms of points thresholds. [14385/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): My Department, through the Higher Education Authority (HEA), provides financial support through the Fund for Students with a Disability (FSD) to higher education institutions to ensure that they are adequately resourced to cater for the needs of students with disabilities.

This Fund provides grants towards the individual needs assessment, provision of services, purchase of equipment and provision of academic supports for students with disabilities. The scheme applies to students who have serious sensory, physical and/or communicative disabilities, including dyslexia.

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) offers places at reduced points to school leavers with disabilities. Admissions under the DARE scheme is regulated by the institutions themselves. Each higher institution determines its own admission policy in relation to DARE, the number of places they reserve for DARE and the allocation of those places.

School Accommodation Provision

159. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a decision to refuse an application by a school (details supplied) for additional school accommodation will be reconsidered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14392/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department received an application for the provision of additional accommodation at the school referred to in respect of both classroom and ancillary accommodation.

The application was processed and, having regard to the demographic information available for the school planning area within which the school in question is located, it was determined that there was sufficient capacity within the school planning area to meet the demand for pri-

mary school places. In that regard the application was not approved.

My Department recently received a request for a review of the application from the school and this is currently being considered. My Department will be in further contact with the school on the matter.

Schools Building Projects Status

160. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the timelines on a new school build (details supplied) in County Kildare have changed; if the pre-tender documents are ready; and when construction will begin and be completed. [14394/18]

169. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the timelines on a new school build (details supplied) in County Kildare have changed; if the pretender documents are ready; and when the construction will commence and conclude. [14475/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 160 and 169 together.

The major building project for the school to which the Deputy refers is at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2b – Detailed Design, which includes the applications for Planning Permission, Fire Cert and Disability Access Cert and the preparation of tender documents. All statutory approvals have been obtained.

A letter recently issued to the school and the Design Team outlining the projected timeframe for progression of this project to tender and construction stage and the steps involved.

The current status of this project is that it is expected to shortly complete stage 2(b) of the architectural planning process. This is the final stage of the design process for any school. The Design Team has indicated that it expects to complete and submit the stage 2(b) report for this project by early April 2018. The review by the Department of the stage 2(b) report generally takes between 10 to 12 weeks.

Upon receipt and review of the stage 2(b) report and providing no other issues arise it is projected that this project will be authorised to complete pre-qualification of Contractors in Quarter 3 2018.

Schools Building Projects

161. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of a report due following a technical review carried out in October 2017 on two buildings as part of a school's inclusion in the capital programme 2019 for school buildings as part of an amalgamation with another school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14396/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I wish to advise that a building project for the schools referred to is included in my Department's 6 Year Capital Programme.

As the Deputy may be aware my Department undertook a technical assessment of the current school sites. The technical report is being finalised and the Department will be in contact with the schools when the work is complete.

Departmental Funding

162. **Deputy Eugene Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the percentage of his Department's budget allocated to programmes (details supplied) in each of the years 2014 to 2017 and to date in 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14400/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): I set out in a table outlining the information requested by the Deputy.

The Adult Literacy budget provides the funding for the Family Learning initiative.

-	2014€'m		2015		2016		2017		2018	
		% Dept Budget	€'m	% Dept Budget	€'m	% Dept Budget	€'m	% Dept Budget	€'m	% Dept Budget
Adult Literacy inc. Family Learning	24.707	0.31%	26.04	0.32%	24.274	0.30%	25.749	0.29%	*	
BTEI	22.486	0.29%	25.46	0.31%	22.279	0.27%	24.558	0.28%	*	
PLC's	6.501	0.08%	7.32	0.09%	7.153	0.09%	5.946	0.07%	*	
ITABE	1.987	0.03%	1.657	0.02%	1.829	0.02%	1.805	0.02%	*	
Community Education	10.279	0.13%	10.173	0.12%	11.18	0.14%	10.311	0.12%	*	
Skills for Work	2.8	0.04%	1.99	0.02%	2.674	0.03%	2.766	0.03%	*	
ESOL			1.085	0.01%	1.38	0.02%	1.903	0.02%	*	
Refugee Resettlement					0.801	0.01%	1.625	0.02%	*	
Music Generation	0.3	0.00%	1.4	0.02%	2.485	0.03%	2.485	0.03%	2.485	0.03%
Department Budget (€'m)		7,848.544		8,187.125		8,204.653		8,799.299		9,156.547

* Figures in respect of SOLAS programme allocations for 2018 are not available until after the SOLAS planning process Q2 2018.

Summer Works Scheme

163. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason a school (details supplied) was not awarded funding in the summer works scheme to replace windows; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14402/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The current Summer Works Scheme (SWS) 2016 -2017 was applied on a multi-annual basis. The Deputy will be aware that nearly 50% of schools have applied for inclusion under the scheme which reflects a very high demand.

Almost €80 million has been approved to date under the SWS, in respect of over 640 school projects in categories 1 - 6. Details of the successful school applicants are published on my Department's website www.education.ie.

The 2018 budgetary provision will allow my Department to meet the carry over costs of summer works projects already approved. The assessment of applications in the remaining cat-

egories 7-10, including the application from the school referred to by the Deputy for a category 7 project, is reliant on the availability of funding.

I wish to advise the Deputy that the further works referred, in respect of the school in question, are appropriate to the SWS, as a category 3 project. It will be open to the school to apply under any future scheme for such works. Alternatively, the school may use its minor works grant, which all primary schools received late last year, to carry out the works in full or on a phased basis as the grant permits if the school consider the works to be a priority.

Student Grant Scheme Appeals

164. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the Student Grant Appeals Board has examined an application for a SUSI grant by a person (details supplied); the outcome of this appeal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14403/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): Under Section 21(2) of the Student Support Act 2011 an applicant has 30 days, from the date of the Appeals Officer's decision in the awarding authority, to submit their appeal to the Student Grants Appeals Board.

Under Section 21(3) of the Act, the Appeals Board may extend this period by a further 30 days, if it is satisfied that the applicant has given reasonable cause to so extend.

As the student to whom the Deputy refers did not submit an appeal within the statutory timelines provided for in the Act, the appeal is not admissible for consideration by the Board.

The Board does not have any discretion to extend the time period beyond that allowed for in the Act.

Departmental Staff Data

165. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the percentage of persons employed in his Department that have a disability, expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14437/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Disability Act 2005 requires public bodies to promote and support the employment of people with disabilities and to achieve a target of 3% of staff with disabilities. In this Department in 2016 the percentage of employees with a disability under the definition of the Disability Act 2005 was 3.94% (head count) and 3.78% (whole time equivalent).

Under the comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities, which was published in 2015, the Government committed to progressively increasing the public employment target of 3% to 6%. This Department and its agencies will work to achieve the new targets in the coming years.

Schools Building Projects Status

166. **Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the new building construction for a school (details supplied) in County Wicklow; the timeline

for construction; if a schedule of accommodation has been provided to the school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14465/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): As the Deputy is aware, a building project for the school to which he refers is included in my Department's 6 Year Construction Programme. In the context of progressing the building project, my Department has undertaken a site visit to the school. The schedule of accommodation is currently being devised and will be provided to the patron, Kildare Wicklow Education Training Board (KWETB), when completed.

The building project will be devolved to KWETB for delivery and it is my Department's intention to engage with KWETB shortly in this regard.

DEIS Eligibility

167. **Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school (details supplied) will be accepted into the DEIS programme. [14470/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): We have, for the first time, introduced an objective, statistics based model for deciding which schools merit inclusion in the DEIS Programme, so that all stakeholders can have confidence that we are targeting extra resources at those schools with the highest concentrated levels of disadvantage. The methodology adopted to assess levels of disadvantage in schools is based on centrally held data with a uniform application across the entire school system to assess levels of disadvantage in Primary and Post-Primary schools.

A detailed document explaining the methodology used in the Identification process is available on the Department's website at

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/DEIS-Identification-Process.pdf>

An update of the identification model is currently underway. This will take account of updated school data as provided by schools for the current school year combined with the Pobal HP Index of Deprivation, based on CSO Small Area Population statistics derived from the 2016 National Census. It is envisaged that this process will be completed in the coming weeks.

Should this exercise reveal that any school, including the school referred to by the Deputy, which did not qualify for DEIS in 2017 meets the criteria applicable to schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage based on the updated information then additional schools may be included subject to available resources.

Speech and Language Therapy Provision

168. **Deputy Tony McLoughlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school (details supplied) will be included in the new pilot scheme between the HSE and his Department for speech and language therapy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14471/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Programme for a Partnership Government states that a new model of In-School Speech and Language Therapy will be established.

28 March 2018

In October of this year, Budget 2018 provided an additional €2M to introduce a pilot/demonstration project for in-school Therapy services in 2018.

The demonstration project will develop and test a model for the delivery of in school speech and language and occupational therapy support, in a defined regional area, across a range of schools, in conjunction with the Health Service Executive (HSE) and supplementing existing HSE therapy services.

The pilot will focus on developing greater linkages between educational and therapy supports.

An Interdepartmental Working Group, including representatives from my Department, the National Council for Special Education, the Department of Health, the Health Service Executive, and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, has been appointed to develop the pilot/demonstration model for In-school Therapy Services.

This Working Group will make recommendations as to which region, or regions, the pilot should take place in. The schools which will be invited to participate in the pilot will therefore depend on this decision.

I will be announcing further details in relation to the project in the near future.

Question No. 169 answered with Question No. 160.

Schools Building Contractors

170. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of an appointment for a main contractor for a school (details supplied) in County Limerick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14480/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The project to which the Deputy refers has been devolved for delivery to the local Education and Training Board (ETB).

The project has been tendered and the ETB recently submitted the Tender Report. This Report is currently being evaluated by my Department. Once the Tender Report has been evaluated, and assuming that there are no issues with it, the project will be approved to proceed to tender and construction.

Schools Building Projects Status

171. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason for further delay in progressing with a new school (details supplied); and the efforts being made to move this building project forward. [14484/18]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The major building project for the school to which the Deputy refers is at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2b – Detailed Design, which includes the applications for Planning Permission, Fire Cert and Disability Access Cert and the preparation of tender documents. All statutory approvals have been obtained.

A letter recently issued to the school and the Design Team outlining the projected timeframe for progression of this project to tender and construction stage and the steps involved. In that

context, my Department anticipates that this school building project will commence construction in Quarter 3 2019.

The current status of this project is that it is expected to shortly complete stage 2(b) of the architectural planning process. This is the final stage of the design process for any school. The Design Team has indicated that it expects to complete and submit the stage 2(b) report for this project by early April 2018. The review by the Department of the stage 2(b) report generally takes between 10 to 12 weeks.

Upon receipt and review of the stage 2(b) report and providing no other issues arise it is projected that this project will be authorised to complete pre-qualification of Contractors in Quarter 3 2018.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Tribunal Applications

172. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality further to Parliamentary Question No. 133 of 15 November 2017, if the requested documentation (details supplied) relating to an application to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Tribunal that was sent in the week of 18 December 2017 has been received; if a receipt will be issued for this documentation; and the timeframe for an award to be made in respect of this case. [14315/18]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy is aware, the Criminal Injuries Compensation Tribunal, is independent of my Department in the processing of individual applications under the Scheme. However, to be of assistance to the Deputy I have had enquiries made with the Tribunal.

I have been informed that the correspondence referred to by the Deputy has not been received by the Tribunal. If the applicant contacts the Tribunal directly with details of the supplementary documentation provided, they will provide assistance.

Crime Data

173. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of persons arrested by An Garda Síochána on an annual basis over the past five years in tabular form, with particular reference to those detained under section 4 of the Criminal Justice Act 1984, section 2 of the Criminal Justice (Drug Trafficking) Act 1996 and section 50 of the Criminal Justice Act 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14327/18]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I have requested a report from the Garda authorities in relation to this matter and I will contact the Deputy directly once the information is to hand.

Garda Youth Diversion Projects

174. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans for Garda youth diversion projects; if his attention has been drawn to plans by the Irish Youth Justice Service to examine the funding and service delivery model for these projects; his views on whether proposed new arrangements will result in the closure of youth diversion projects administered by independent youth services; if these projects are funded through the European Social Fund; if legal advice has been provided to put new arrangements in place for the funding of Garda

youth diversion projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14342/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton):

As the Deputy may be aware, my Department is obliged to carry out a Call for proposals process during 2018 in relation to the provision of Garda Youth Diversion Project (GYDP) services, to fully comply with requirements related to the co-funding of projects by the European Social Fund Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020.

To ensure State-wide coverage of GYDP services for young people, (which does not exist at present), the intention is that, in general, service provision will be aligned with Garda Divisions or other appropriate local areas with a distinct community identity as may be agreed during a wide ranging consultation process which is currently ongoing. Issues of community identity and numbers of potential participants on GYDPs in the area will be key considerations here.

The provision of GYDP services in all parts of the State has obvious advantages, particularly in terms of providing services for significant numbers of young people who cannot currently access them. I might add that an independent evaluation report of the operation of an integrated approach to delivery of GYDP services within County Kerry, commissioned by my Department is expected shortly. This report will help with the further development of the Call for Proposals documentation.

My Department is very much aware of concerns expressed by youth justice workers and their representatives. I can assure the Deputy that careful consideration is being given to all issues raised by stakeholders involved in GYDPs, including those of independent service providers, as part of the ongoing consultation process. This process includes arrangements for an extensive series of meetings with community based organisations and project workers which will facilitate closer communication and exchange of information in relation to these matters. The consultation process will help to inform further development of the approach in advance of the Call for Proposals being issued.

In addition, the consultations will include arrangements to hear the views of young people, including participants or former participants on GYDPs.

GYDPs deliver valuable services for young people who have committed a crime or may be at risk of offending as well as providing important support for An Garda Síochána at local level. I can assure the Deputy that in the context of the Call for Proposals my Department is committed to ensuring continuity of service for participants on GYDPs and maintain a community driven approach to their operation, as well as minimising any disruption for workers and service providers. In this regard, I am advised that the Call for Proposals process will facilitate existing service providers forming consortiums, which could apply to provide services under the new comprehensive approach being developed.

Furthermore, and in line with the overall objective of providing GYDP services to all children and young persons who require them, I am advised that the Call for Proposals will require applicants to provide for continuity of GYDP services. It is of course a matter for organisations which apply to provide future GYDP services under the Call for Proposals to ensure that they comply with relevant legal responsibilities, including in relation to the European Communities (Protection of Employees on Transfer of Undertakings) Regulations 2003 (S.I. No. 131/2003).

Firearms and Ammunition Security

175. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the person or body his Department consulted with during the preparation of SI No. 646 of 2017 Firearms (Storage

of Firearms and Ammunition by Firearms Dealers) Regulations 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14366/18]

176. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if his Department considered the risks associated with time lock mechanisms before including such mechanisms as a requirement for strong rooms in the context of SI No. 646 of 2017 Firearms (Storage of Firearms and Ammunition by Firearms Dealers) Regulations 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14367/18]

177. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if alternatives to time lock mechanisms for strong rooms were considered, such as distress codes in alarm systems, in the context of SI No. 646 of 2017 Firearms (Storage of Firearms and Ammunition by Firearms Dealers) Regulations 2017; if so, the reason these alternatives were discounted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14368/18]

178. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if his Department considered the impact of the requirements contained in SI No. 646 of 2017 Firearms (Storage of Firearms and Ammunition by Firearms Dealers) Regulations 2017 on small businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14369/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 175 to 178, inclusive, together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that Statutory Instrument 646 of 2017, entitled Firearms (Storage of Firearms and Ammunition by Firearms Dealers) Regulations 2017, was signed into law by me and circulated to firearms dealers.

These Regulations give effect to minimum standards for the safe and secure storage of firearms and ammunition in the premises of firearms dealers. They recognise that firearms dealers are entitled to be in possession of large quantities of firearms but require them to conduct business from a premises that has been constructed to a high standard. The Regulations also recognise the different categories of firearms dealers and scales the requirements depending on the quantities of ammunition and firearms being stored. For example, a time lock requirement does not apply to those dealers who deal only in small quantities of ammunition.

This Statutory Instrument derives from the powers conferred under Sections 9(10) and (11) of the Firearms Act 1925, which were inserted by Section 38 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006. Section 9(10) provides “The Minister, after consultation with the Commissioner, may by regulations specify minimum standards to be complied with in relation to premises in which a firearms dealer carries on a business or proposes to do so”.

Section 9(11) provides “The minimum standards shall be determined by reference to

- (a) the security of the premises
- (b) their safety, and
- (c) their standard of construction,

and having regard to their use for, as the case may be, the manufacture, repair, testing, proving or sale of firearms or ammunition”.

These provisions were passed by the Oireachtas on 5 July 2006 and signed into law by the President on 16 July 2006 and commenced on 1 January 2008.

The Regulations were developed following consultation with a sub-group of the Firearms

Consultative Panel (FCP) consisting of registered firearms dealers. It was agreed by the FCP when this sub group was being established that the firearms dealers on the Panel at the time should sit on the sub-group for the purpose of examining this particular issue. Firearms dealers' premises were visited in fourteen counties prior to and during the drafting of this legislation. The dealers who sat on the sub-group are knowledgeable of the security that they and their colleagues utilise. Additionally, An Garda Síochána who were represented on the group have extensive experience with regard to security measures available in the industry and particularly in firearms dealers' premises.

Concerns have been raised by some firearms dealers, particularly in relation to the time lock requirement. The inclusion of the requirement for time locks was originally suggested by the sub-group to act as a significant deterrent and discouragement to criminal attack. Some dealers have claimed that their monitored alarm system serves the same purpose as a time-lock. This is not correct. The existing monitored alarm system will alert if the strong room is opened but it will not prevent the door from being opened. The time-lock mechanism will prevent the door from being opened until a time pre-determined by the firearms dealer. This measure is to make a 'Tiger Kidnapping' situation less likely to occur whereby a dealer could be forced to open the strong room under duress. The time-lock will lock the door at a time decided by the dealer (e.g. at the end of the business day) and cannot be opened until a pre-determined time (e.g. the commencement of the next business day.) It is also understood that some dealers view is that time locks would prevent access in the event of a fire and could lead to dealers being held kidnapped for a longer period while waiting for time locks to open. It is likely that criminals would not risk waiting for the deactivation of time locks when there are risks that other security measures included in the premises could be activated e.g. duress panic buttons.

The Commissioner of An Garda Síochána has strongly endorsed the security measures contained in this Regulation and has advised that the inclusion of a requirement for a time-lock on the strong room door will deter criminal activity and require the use of greater resources by any person attempting to access firearms or ammunition illegally. Similar security measures have been applied successfully elsewhere, e.g. in banks, pharmacies and the jewellery sector.

In order to minimise the financial impact, a lead-in time of twelve months (to 1 February 2019) for compliance has been included in the Regulation in order to permit dealers sufficient time to comply with the legislation.

I wish to advise the Deputy that I have no plans to amend these regulations which have been introduced as a public safety measure.

Garda Youth Diversion Projects

179. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason it has been decided without consultation that there will only be one service provider per Garda division; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14411/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): As the Deputy may be aware, my Department is obliged to carry out a Call for Proposals process during 2018 in relation to the provision of Garda Youth Diversion Project (GYDP) services, to fully comply with requirements related to the co-funding of projects by the European Social Fund Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020.

To ensure State-wide coverage of GYDP services for young people, (which does not exist at present), the intention is that, in general, service provision will be aligned with Garda Divisions

or other appropriate local areas with a distinct community identity as may be agreed during a wide ranging consultation process which is currently in train. Issues of community identify and numbers of potential participants on GYDPs in a given area will be key considerations here. I can assure the Deputy that final decisions in relation to service area boundaries will not be made until the consultation process has been completed.

My Department is very much aware of concerns expressed by youth justice workers and their representatives. I can assure the Deputy that careful consideration is being given to all issues raised by stakeholders involved in GYDPs as part of the on-going consultation process, which includes arrangements for an extensive series of meetings with community based organisations and project workers to facilitate closer communication and exchange of information in relation to these matters. The consultation process will help to inform further development of the overall approach in advance of the Call for Proposals being issued.

I can assure the Deputy that the new approach to GYDP provision which is being developed in preparation for the Call for Proposals will not reduce the level of service that already exists, or the importance of community involvement in its delivery. On the contrary, the intention is to build on, update and improve a very valuable service, so that it is available to every child or young person in the country who requires it. While certain aspects of the new approach have been determined, work is ongoing to complete the full details to be included in the Call for Proposals, which is expected to issue later this year. I firmly believe that community ownership and participation of the projects is an essential dimension that must be preserved and strengthened in the working out of this process.

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

180. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the legislation that is now required for Ireland to become fully compliant with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and the timeline that is being worked to in each case. [14430/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy Finian McGrath): It is intended that the final legislative amendments needed to enable Ireland to comply with the Convention will be contained in the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016 and in a stand-alone Bill on Deprivation of Liberty which will be sponsored by the Minister for Health and myself and which we aim to have enacted by end 2018.

The Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016 is currently awaiting Committee Stage in Dáil Éireann.

A process of public consultation, on Draft Heads of Bill on Deprivation of Liberty concluded on March 9th . However, a number of organisations have sought a short extension to this which I have instructed my officials in the Department of Health to grant. The Government has approved both Bills to receive priority drafting within the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. The aim is to enact both Bills by the end of 2018, and if possible sooner in the case of the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 also needs to be commenced and this requires the establishment of a Decision Support Service (DSS) under the Mental Health Commission.

The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 provides a modern statutory framework to support decision-making by adults with capacity difficulties. The Act was signed into law on 30 December 2015.

New administrative processes and support measures, including the setting up of the Decision Support Service within the Mental Health Commission (a body under the auspices of the Department of Health), must be put in place before the substantive provisions of the Act can be commenced. A high-level Steering Group comprised of senior officials from the Department of Justice and Equality, the Department of Health, the Mental Health Commission and the Courts Service, together with the Director of the Decision Support Service, is overseeing the establishment and commissioning of the Decision Support Service (DSS) and this work is ongoing.

The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 (Commencement of Certain Provisions) Order 2016 (S.I. No. 515 of 2016), brought some provisions of Part 1 (Preliminary and General) and Part 9 (Director of the Decision Support Service) of the Act into operation on 17 October 2016. These provisions were brought into operation in order to progress the setting up of the DSS and to enable the process of recruitment of the Director of the DSS to begin. The recruitment and appointment of the Director of the DSS, and the appointment of DSS staff, is a matter for the Mental Health Commission with the approval of the Minister for Health. Ms Áine Flynn was appointed Director of the Decision Support Service on 2 October 2017.

The key preparations are being put in place under the oversight of the Steering Group to allow for further commencement orders for the provisions of the 2015 Act to be made when the DSS is ready to roll out the new decision-making support options. The Director is also working in a very determined way to get the necessary staff resources, processes, IT system, expert panels, codes of practice and regulations in place in order that the Decision Support Service can be up and running as quickly as possible. However, it is not possible at the moment to provide an exact time line for the full implementation of the 2015 Act, as there are many complex strands to this work, including involvement of multiple organisations, and the prevailing view is that the Decision Support Service will not be ready to become operational until 2019.

The 2018 Budget provides for an allocation of €3 million in the Justice and Equality Vote for the establishment of the Decision Support Service.

The commencement of Part 8 of the Act, which provides for a legislative framework for advance healthcare directives, is a matter for the Minister for Health.

Departmental Staff Data

181. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the percentage of persons employed in his Department who have a disability expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14443/18]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will be aware, Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 provides for a statutory report on the employment of people with disabilities in the public sector. This report is compiled by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, from information provided by all public bodies staffed by civil servants, and gives details of the number of people with a disability employed in the Civil Service. This report is submitted to the National Disability Authority (NDA).

Officials in my Department are currently preparing the 2017 return. This return indicates that 129 out of 2371 employees, or 5.4%, reported having a disability. This exceeds the current 3% target of employment of persons with disabilities set in the Disability Act 2005 and we are actively working to meet a 6% target. My Department does not have data regarding the breakdown in whole time equivalent terms as the data gathered on disability is anonymised to

facilitate staff declaring a disability.

Garda Youth Diversion Projects

182. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason the Irish Youth Service has not included a project (details supplied) in the European tender regulations covering protection of employees on transfer of undertakings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14481/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): As the Deputy will be aware my Department is obliged to carry out a Call for Proposals process during 2018 in relation to the provision of Garda Youth Diversion Project (GYDP) services, to fully comply with requirements related to the co-funding of projects by the European Social Fund Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020.

I can assure the Deputy that my Department is committed to ensuring continuity of service for participants on all GYDPs and to maintaining a community driven approach to their operation, as well as minimising any disruption for workers and service providers. In this regard, I am advised that the Call for Proposals process will facilitate existing service providers forming consortiums which could apply to provide services under the new GYDP model. In addition, and in line with the overall objective of providing GYDP services to all children and young persons who require them, I am advised that the Call for Proposals will require applicants to provide for continuity of GYDP services.

I can assure the Deputy that the new approach to GYDP provision which is being developed in preparation for the Call for Proposals will not reduce the level of service that already exists, or the importance of community involvement in its delivery. On the contrary, the intention is to build on, update and improve a very valuable service so that it is available to every child or young person in the country who requires it. This improvement to the service will have benefits for significant numbers of young people in the State who cannot currently access GYDP services. While certain aspects of the new service model have been determined, work is ongoing to complete the full details to be included in the Call for Proposals, which is expected to issue later this year. I am convinced that community ownership and participation of the projects is an essential dimension that must be preserved and strengthened in the working out of this process.

Careful consideration is being given to all issues raised by stakeholders involved in GYDPs as part of a wide-ranging consultation process, which is currently ongoing. This process includes arrangements for an extensive series of meetings with community based organisations and project workers which will facilitate closer communication and exchange of information in relation to these matters. The consultation process will help to inform further development of the Call for Proposals in advance of it being issued.

As indicated above, the Call for Proposals will require applicants to provide for continuity of GYDP services to current participants. It is of course a matter for organisations which apply to provide future GYDP services under the Call for Proposals to ensure that they comply with relevant legal responsibilities, including in relation to the European Communities (Protection of Employees on Transfer of Undertakings) Regulations 2003 (S.I. No. 131/2003).

In conclusion, I might add that while my Department does provide funding for the operation of over 100 Garda Youth Diversion Projects, it is not the employer of the youth justice workers on these projects and has no human resources or industrial relations function in this regard.

Proposed Legislation

183. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he has met with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport or his own officials recently regarding the comments made by the European Commission on the Judicial Appointments Bill 2017 not being in line with European standards; and his views on these comments. [14156/18]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Deputy is referring to the comments of the European Commission in their ‘Country Report Ireland 2018’ published as part of the European Semester on 7 March last, which state the following:

“The envisaged composition of a new body for proposing judicial appointments raises concerns regarding the level of participation of the judiciary in that body. The proposed composition of the Judicial Appointments Commission, which would comprise only 3 judges over 13 (including a lay chairperson accountable to the Oireachtas) would not be in line with European standards (Paragraph 47 of Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)12 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 17 November 2010), and was opposed by the Association of judges in Ireland.”

Paragraph 47 of Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)12 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, in turn, sets out that an independent and competent Authority drawn in substantial part from the judiciary should be authorised to make recommendations or express opinions concerning the selection of judges.

Of course the Government has taken note of the European Commission comments. It would point out though that there is no single international binding standard or norm in this area. It is worth noting that the said 2010 Council of Europe Recommendation also states, in its paragraph 48, that the membership of the relevant independent authorities should ensure “the widest possible representation”.

Judicial appointments reform is part of the Programme for Partnership Government which commits to the introduction of a new structure comprising two central elements of a lay majority and an independent chairperson. The Bill as published had provided for a substantial judicial presence, through committees of the Judicial Appointments Commission, which ensured direct membership of all of the court presidents in the relevant selection processes, whilst the overarching body had the three most senior judicial offices as members. The Deputy will be aware that a significant number of amendments originating from opposition parties were made to the Bill by the Dáil Select Committee on Justice and Equality, including an amendment which had the effect of greatly reducing the level of participation of court presidents in the process by removing the presidents of the lower courts from any participation in the new body. As I pointed out at the conclusion of Committee Stage, it is important to ensure the appropriate and distinct inputs of all court presidents in the selection process, and much more work needs to be done with a view to advancing the Bill to the next stage in its enactment. My intention now is to bring forward for Report Stage a number of amendments arising from the changes made at Select Committee, including amendments concerning the composition of the new Judicial Appointments Commission and enhanced judicial input, whilst maintaining the Bill’s two key components of a lay majority and independent chairperson.

I have met with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport recently to discuss the progress of the Bill and related issues. My officials have briefed me in relation to the comments of the European Commission.

Trade Agreements

184. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the position of her Department regarding the Mercosur beef trade deal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14256/18]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): An EU-Mercosur Free Trade Agreement (FTA) would be the EU's largest trade deal to date, four times the size of the trade agreement with Japan. It aims to eliminate trade tariffs between the EU and the Mercosur region. Irish exporters are currently subject to trade tariffs, barriers and restrictions, when exporting to Mercosur. The proposed FTA should make exports from Ireland more attractive and potentially increase demand for Irish products.

Sectorial opportunities for Ireland in further enhancing a trading relationship with this region include software and services in telecommunications, financial services, digital content and travel, engineering products and services, life sciences, agriculture, food and beverages, and education services. Within the region, Brazil is Ireland's main trading partner and has been identified as possessing "high growth market potential" by Enterprise Ireland.

From a foreign direct investment perspective, the main opportunities are in the areas of financial services, banking, business services and chemicals as multinationals in the region begin their internationalisation. It will be an important region for outward direct investment from Irish companies.

In the context of the Mercosur negotiations, Ireland has many "offensive" and "defensive" interests, including in the agri-food sector and engages on these issues with the Commission, in its role as chief negotiator, through various EU Committees.

While all FTA's include agricultural market access and TRQs (Tariff Rate Quotas), TRQs provided under such agreements are not always fully utilised by our trading partners. Equally, most Member States tend to have sensitives in relation to certain goods or services to be comprehended under an FTA.

I am keenly aware of the issues faced by the Agriculture sector and the challenges posed by a trade agreement with Mercosur. In this regard, Ireland has continued to highlight the cumulative impact of agricultural market access in relation to all EU trade agreements. My Department has done this through engagement with the Trade Policy Committee in Brussels, as well as joining with other Member States in formally writing to the Commission outlining our concerns. In addition, our concerns have been raised at political level including this Department's Ministerial team, myself included, raising the issues with counterparts, both at Trade Council deliberations and bilaterally with the EU Commission and by the Taoiseach with Commission President Juncker.

Overall, Ireland remains fully committed to this negotiation, especially in view of the important economic and political gains expected for both sides from a comprehensive, ambitious and balanced EU-Mercosur Association Agreement. However, we believe that any TRQ offered in relation to beef imports must be structured - in terms of its size, staging, composition and the application of in-quota tariff rates - in a way that mitigates the potential impact of a Mercosur deal on the EU beef sector.

It remains unclear what the final outcome of the negotiations will be, although it must be acknowledged that for the Mercosur countries offers on EU agricultural produce are essential to securing any deal. Ireland will only be in a position to take a view on the proposed Agreement when all elements are finalised, including on sensitive agricultural products such as beef

and dairy and our view will be informed on the aggregate benefits the Agreement offers our economy as a whole.

Fire Safety Regulations

185. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a copy of the current standards produced by the National Standards Authority of Ireland for fire detection and fire alarm systems in buildings and for emergency lighting will be provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14376/18]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The current Irish Standards for Fire Detection and Fire Alarm systems in buildings and for Emergency Lighting are I.S. 3217:2013 and I.S. 3218:2013. These publications are the main reference documents concerning Fire Alarm systems and Emergency Lighting systems in Ireland. A copy of these standards will be sent to the Deputy.

Standards may be viewed free of charge at NSAI Headquarters, 1 Swift Square, Northwood, Santry, Dublin D09 A0E4 or are available at a fee through the NSAI online webstore <https://shop.standards.ie/>.

Enterprise Ireland Funding

186. **Deputy Tom Neville** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if there grants are available to indigenous companies that wish to exhibit at global events relating to their specific industry. [14383/18]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Enterprise Ireland is the state agency under my aegis with responsibility for helping Irish companies to internationalise and scale. On an annual basis Enterprise Ireland works with approximately 5,000 companies through a network of market and sector advisers based across 10 national offices and 33 international offices.

Enterprise Ireland provides a range of supports to support companies with global ambition to internationalise. On 12 March, Enterprise Ireland announced that it is set to undertake over 200 international and domestic trade events in 2018 to accelerate the number of Enterprise Ireland clients diversifying into new markets, beyond the UK and into the Eurozone and global markets. The number of trade events being undertaken represents a 50% increase on 2017. This list of Trade Missions and Events is communicated to all client companies and is publicly available.

Under Enterprise Ireland's recently launched Market Discovery Fund, eligible client companies can avail of funding for Trade Fair participation. For Trade Fair participation, Enterprise Ireland can provide grant support at 50% or €37.5k (whichever is the lesser) for a maximum expenditure of €75K. The Local Enterprise Offices may also be able to offer assistance or advice to eligible companies to participate in trade events designed to grow exports. Contact information is available at localenterprise.ie.

Departmental Staff Data

187. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation

the percentage of persons employed in her Department that have a disability, expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14432/18]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Data on the number and percentage of persons employed in my Department that have a disability is currently being collated for end of 2017. This data is being prepared for submission to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's Monitoring Committee by the 31st March 2018.

The latest figures available in respect of my Department are for end of 2016. At 31st December 2016, my Department had 854 employees. Of these, 44 declared that they had a disability. This represents 5.15% of the Department's Staff. This data is per head count. Data is not recorded in whole time equivalent terms.

My Department as a public service employer has a legal obligation under the Disability Act 2005 to report each year on the number and percentage of employees with disabilities. Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 sets out the following obligations on Government Departments and public service bodies with regard to the employment of people with disabilities.

Public bodies must, insofar as practicable, take all reasonable measures to promote and support the employment of people with disabilities.

Public bodies shall ensure, unless there are good reasons for not doing so, that at least 3% of their employees are people with disabilities.

Public bodies must report on an annual basis to a statutory monitoring committee within their parent Department on the number of people with disabilities in their employment and the measures they are taking to promote and support their employment. The monitoring committees in turn submit their reports on such compliance to the Minister of their parent Department and the National Disability Authority (NDA).

The National Disability Inclusion Strategy, 2017 to 2021 is committed to increasing the public sector employment target of persons with disabilities from 3% to 6% by 2024, and will embed this target into all public service workforce planning and recruitment.

HSE Funding

188. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health the funding that was provided to a hospice (details supplied) in each of the years 2011 to 2017 and to date in 2018; the basis upon which this funding level was arrived at; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14302/18]

189. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients treated at a hospice (details supplied) in each of the years 2011 to 2017 and to date in 2018; and the rates of mortality or further transfer. [14303/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 188 and 189 together.

As these are service matters I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Medical Card Applications

190. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Health when a decision on a medical card application review by a person (details supplied) in County Donegal will issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14310/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive (HSE) to respond directly to the Deputy.

Home Care Packages Data

191. **Deputy Catherine Martin** asked the Minister for Health the number of home care package scheme applications awaiting assessment by local health office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14311/18]

192. **Deputy Catherine Martin** asked the Minister for Health the number of home care packages applications in which home care started in each month of the past 12 months, by local health office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14312/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 191 and 192 together.

As these are service matters I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Departmental Funding

193. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the reason adequate funding is not being provided to the HSE in County Galway to provide full-time respite care in a facility (details supplied); the measures he expects parents to take in crisis situations when no respite care is available to them, particularly in circumstances in which other family illnesses arise; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14313/18]

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.

The Programme for Partnership Government states that the Government wishes to provide more accessible respite care to facilitate full support for people with a disability.

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.

Home Help Service Provision

194. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the status of home help hours for an elderly person (details supplied) in County Cork; if additional home help hours can be provided to allow the person remain in their home; and if he will make a statement on the mat-

ter. [14314/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Departmental Correspondence

195. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if correspondence from a person (details supplied) will be responded to; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14320/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The information that the Deputy seeks is not readily available. Therefore, I have asked the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) to investigate the matter and reply directly to the Deputy.

Hospital Equipment

196. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the reason technicians in Our Lady's Hospital, Navan, have stated that they could not stand over the quality of the outputs from the echocardiogram machine in the hospital; if this is affecting the ability of doctors to make the quality diagnosis; when the funding application for a new replacement machine was made; when it was finally replaced; the number of patients that have had to use this faulty diagnostic tool; and if there is a necessity for patients to be called back for diagnosis with a functioning echocardiogram. [14322/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

Long-Term Illness Scheme Coverage

197. **Deputy Colm Brophy** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether Addison's disease should be included in the list of illnesses under the long-term illness scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14323/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Long Term Illness (LTI) Scheme was established under Section 59(3) of the Health Act 1970 (as amended). The conditions covered by the LTI are: acute leukaemia; mental handicap; cerebral palsy; mental illness (in a person under 16); cystic fibrosis; multiple sclerosis; diabetes insipidus; muscular dystrophies; diabetes mellitus; parkinsonism; epilepsy; phenylketonuria; haemophilia; spina bifida; hydrocephalus; and conditions arising from the use of Thalidomide. Under the LTI Scheme, patients receive drugs, medicines, and medical and surgical appliances directly related to the treatment of their illness, free of charge.

There are no plans to extend the list of conditions covered by the Scheme.

Medicinal Products Prices

198. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Health the actions he and the HSE

have undertaken following a decision reached at a meeting (details supplied) he attended with representatives from an organisation (details supplied) and others regarding further discussions to take place relating to funding for Translarna; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14324/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Health Service Executive has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drug schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

The Act specifies the criteria to be applied in the making of reimbursement decisions which include the clinical and cost effectiveness of the product, the opportunity cost and the impact on resources that are available to the HSE.

In July 2017, the HSE informed my Department that, following an intensive process, the HSE decided not to reimburse Ataluren (Translarna) for the treatment of Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. The HSE in deciding not to reimburse Translarna did not consider the evidence for its clinical benefit to be sufficiently strong, in the context of the proposed cost and budget impact.

The HSE informed the applicant company of this decision, in keeping with the requirements of the 2013 Act. The applicant has appealed the HSE's decision to the High Court, which is part of the statutory process under Section 27 of the 2013 Act.

As you are aware, a meeting took place on the 11 December 2017 with 2 representative from Muscular Dystrophy Ireland, Dr O'Rourke and HSE and Departmental officials.

Following on from this meeting, the HSE advised the applicant that it is willing to complete a timely review of any new application. It would be open to the company to make revised proposals in relation to pricing or access in this context.

The HSE has notified the company that is ready and willing to review any new application irrespective of the ongoing court proceedings.

Hospital Services

199. **Deputy Timmy Dooley** asked the Minister for Health the reason persons in County Clare who have outpatients appointments for procedures in Croom Hospital, Limerick, are no longer being held in Ennis Hospital; his plans to reinstate an outpatient clinic in Ennis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14328/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service issue, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

Hospitals Building Programme

200. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the status of the refurbishment works at Millstreet community hospital, Millstreet, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14337/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): My Department has asked the Health Service Executive to provide the Deputy directly with the information requested in respect of Millstreet Community Hospital, Cork.

Hospital Appointments Delays

201. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Health if an appointment for a person (details supplied) will be expedited. [14344/18]

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 National Waiting List Management Policy, a standardised approach to managing scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures, January 2014, has been developed to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care. This policy, which has been adopted by the HSE, sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Hospitals Capital Programme

202. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health when a health facility (details supplied) will be progressed to the next stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14347/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Programme for Partnership Government contains a Government commitment regarding the development of a dedicated Cystic Fibrosis (CF) Unit in Beaumont Hospital, to be progressed in the context of a CF Model of Care.

This CF Unit capital project will thus be underpinned by the “Model of Care for People with Cystic Fibrosis in Ireland” which is being developed by the National Clinical Programme for Cystic Fibrosis (NCPCF). The Model of Care will set out standards and requirements for the physical and human resources to be provided for treatment of cystic fibrosis patients from a national perspective.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform governs the processes surrounding the development of healthcare projects by way of guidelines, principally the Public Spending Code. Further rigour is demanded by, and set out in, relevant EU Directives. All proposed projects must be submitted to the HSE’s Capital and Property Steering Committee for approval and prioritisation prior to inclusion in its multi-annual Capital Plans. In terms of the progression of the CF Unit capital project I am happy to confirm that it has been included in the National Planning Framework under Project Ireland 2040, as well as being recommended for inclusion in the capital plan by the HSE National Capital Steering Committee.

Health Services Provision

203. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation plan promised under National Policy and Strategy for the Provision of Neuro-Rehabilitation Services in Ireland 2011-2015; and if a working group to develop this plan has been established

[14350/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): The Programme for a Partnership Government includes a commitment to publish “a plan for advancing Neuro-rehabilitation services in the community”. The development of an implementation framework for the National Policy and Strategy for the provision of Neuro-rehabilitation Services in Ireland is a matter for the Health Service Executive (HSE).

As the Deputy’s question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

Disease Incidence

204. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in County Louth that have been diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. [14351/18]

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.

Health Services Data

205. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the services in County Louth for persons with a diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease; and the number of staff involved [14352/18]

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.

Health Services Provision

206. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health his plans to address the needs of persons with a diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease. [14353/18]

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.

Cross-Border Health Services Provision

207. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health the extent of North-South co-operation for treatment of persons who have been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14354/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): The Model of Care for Neurology was launched by the Director General of the HSE in late 2016. This was developed by the HSE's National Clinical Programme for Neurology in collaboration with consultants, nurses, health and social care professionals and patient support groups. It aims to address the need for strategic development of neurology services in the provision of better care for these patients.

This year, funding has been allocated by the HSE to commence development of peri- and post-operative services to support patients with Parkinson's Disease receiving Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS). The HSE advises that it intends to utilise all potential for Irish patients to be referred for the surgical element of the service to the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast.

As the query raised is a service matter, I have also asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly with any further information.

Health Services Provision

208. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the correspondence received by Members of the Houses of the Oireachtas from an association (details supplied) which sets out three key requirements for persons with a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14355/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have been unable to confirm the correspondence noted by the Deputy, but understand it relates to matters raised by the Parkinson's Association in March of this year.

The Model of Care for Neurology was launched by the Director General of the HSE in late 2016. The Model of Care was developed by the HSE's National Clinical Programme for Neurology in collaboration with consultants, nurses, health and social care professionals and patient support groups. It aims to address the need for strategic development of neurology services in the provision of better care for these patients. This year, funding has been allocated by the HSE to commence development of peri- and post-operative services to support patients with Parkinson's Disease receiving Deep Brain Stimulation.

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 assessing 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 and is guided by two principles: equality of opportunity and improving the quality of life for people with disabilities.

Health Services Charges

209. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the appeals process for a person denied a reimbursement by a HSE local office for the refund of the cost of a blood test wrongly charged to a medical card or general practitioner card holder by their general practitioner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14358/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this question relates to a service matter, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

Dental Services Provision

210. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if dental treatment for a person (details supplied) will be carried out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14371/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Appointments Status

211. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Health the status of a person (details supplied) on the waiting list for a MRI in the Midland Regional Hospital. [14377/18]

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 National Waiting List Management Policy, a standardised approach to managing scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures, January 2014, has been developed to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care. This policy, which has been adopted by the HSE, sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Drugs Payment Scheme Coverage

212. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if electrode patches for TENS machines are covered under the medical card in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14381/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013, the HSE has statutory responsibility for the administration of the community drug schemes; therefore, the matter has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

General Practitioner Services Provision

213. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if full-time general practitioner cover has been restored to a hospital (details supplied). [14387/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Home Help Service Provision

214. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if home help for the purpose of help with household chores can be facilitated for a person (details supplied). [14391/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

General Practitioner Contracts

215. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the status of the general practitioner contract discussions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14395/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government is committed to delivering more non-acute care within the primary care sector, so that better care close to home can be provided for communities around the country.

General Practitioners play an important role in the primary care system. It is generally accepted that there is a need to modernise the current GMS contract and ensure that general practice is a viable and rewarding career for medical graduates. My aim is to develop a contract which has a population health focus, providing in particular for health promotion and disease prevention and for the structured ongoing care of chronic conditions. A new contract must be flexible and be able to respond to the changing nature of the GP workforce. It must also include provisions in relation to service quality and standards, performance, accountability and transparency.

It is essential that engagement on GP contractual issues is aimed squarely at meeting the substantial challenges, current and future, the health service and general practice face. The latest phase of engagement with GP representatives commenced in January 2017, and discussions were progressed on a wide range of items throughout 2017. Discussions are currently paused, and, at my request, officials of my Department are working with their counterparts in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and in the HSE to ensure that the overall approach is focused fully on the strategic challenges and on the Government's health services reform agenda. It is important to ensure that any new contract will result in service improvements across general practice benefitting both patients and GPs.

I expect that engagement with GP representative bodies will commence shortly. I look forward to progress being made in the coming months on the GP contract.

EU Directives

216. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health the aspects of the basic safety standards directive and the transposition of the health elements which Ireland has discretion in applying; and his views on whether those discretionary aspects of the directive will facilitate the continuance of chiropractors as referees for X-ray. [14399/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): While most of the provisions in the Basic Safety Standards Directive (BSSD) are binding, there are some articles where discretion is afforded to Member States (MSs) as to how they are transposed into national law.

The main health provisions in this regard were outlined in a consultation process undertaken by my Department in June 2017. Copies of the consultation document and associated information note are attached.

The Directive defines referrer and practitioner with certain roles and responsibilities attaching to same. MSs are required to designate health professionals as referrers and practitioners.

The statutory instrument transposing the BSSD will designate those who may refer for radiological tests, those who may carry them out and other functions and in this regard I propose to designate nurses, doctors, dentists and radiographers as appropriate. Chiropractors are not designated as referrers or practitioners in the current regulations (S.I. 478/2002) and it is not proposed to designate them in the new regulations.

Further information is contained in the following links.

[Table 1]

[Table 2]

Drugs Payment Scheme Coverage

217. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 669 of 20 March 2018, the type of information being sought on Kuvan; the reason for seeking that information; the timeline for the completion of discussions on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14404/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drug schemes, in accordance with the provisions of the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013; therefore, the matter has been referred to the HSE for reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Appointments Status

218. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14408/18]

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 National Waiting List Management Policy, a standardised approach to managing scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures, January 2014, has been developed to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care. This policy, which has been adopted by the HSE, sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Hospital Appointments Status

219. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** 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. [14412/18]

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 National Waiting List Management Policy, a standardised approach to managing scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures, January 2014, has been developed to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care. This policy, which has been adopted by the HSE, sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Hospital Appointments Status

220. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appointment for a person (details supplied) for an operation; if this appointment will be expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14424/18]

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 be-

half, 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 National Waiting List Management Policy, a standardised approach to managing scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures, January 2014, has been developed to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care. This policy, which has been adopted by the HSE, sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Mental Health Services Data

221. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 406 of 20 February 2018, if the facility referred to (details supplied) has adequate staffing and resources in place in order that the 20 beds are fully operational and available at present; the number of those beds that are occupied; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14425/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Departmental Staff Data

222. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the percentage of persons employed in his Department who have a disability expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14441/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 sets out the legal obligations of public service bodies to:

- Promote and support the employment of people with disabilities;
- Comply with any statutory Code of Practice;
- Meet a target of 3% of employees with disabilities;
- Report every year on achievement of these obligations.

In line with the provisions of the Act, the Department of Health reports on an annual basis to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform the percentage of Department employees who have voluntarily declared a disability.

Percentages are calculated in head count terms and, as of 31 December 2017, this figure stood at 4.6%. Records relating to disability status are maintained separately from personnel records and the Department's Disability Liaison Officer does not retain WTE figures in respect of Department staff voluntarily declaring a disability.

Tobacco Control Measures

223. **Deputy Colm Brophy** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether heated tobacco products should not be given a reduced and more favourable excise treatment than cigarettes in view of the World Health Organization's position that all forms of tobacco use are harmful; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14462/18]

224. **Deputy Colm Brophy** asked the Minister for Health his plans to engage with the Department of Finance on the excise duties of heated tobacco products in advance of their potential launch here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14463/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 223 and 224 together.

The rate of duty to be applied to any tobacco product is a matter for the Department of Finance.

In the consideration of the excise treatment to apply to new tobacco products, the Department of Finance consults with my Department in relation to the compliance of those tobacco products with public health tobacco legislation. My Department continues to monitor emerging research and evidence in relation to tobacco products, including heated tobacco products.

Hospital Beds Data

225. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of hospital bed days lost to date in 2018 in Mallow hospital owing to bed closures; the number by beds being closed due to staff shortages, refurbishment and cost containment in tabular form. [14468/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to you directly as soon as possible.

Cancer Screening Programmes

226. **Deputy Tony McLoughlin** asked the Minister for Health if women in the north-west region, in particular in counties Sligo and Leitrim, will have the continued access to a follow-up mammography at Sligo University Hospital beyond 2019; the process involved in supplying this contract; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14472/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I am advised that the contract for a mobile mammography service at Sligo University Hospital, providing follow-up mammography for breast cancer patients post treatment, has been extended recently for a further 12 months.

The contract for this service was awarded following a tendering process run by the HSE.

Medical Products

227. **Deputy Michael Harty** asked the Minister for Health his plans to examine the issue of accountability, compensation and the provision of medical services in relation to children affected by foetal anti-convulsant syndrome; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14473/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Medicines containing sodium valproate are approved in Ireland, and the rest of the EU, for the treatment of epilepsy and bipolar disorder. It has been well established that children exposed to valproate in the womb have an increased risk of congenital malformations and neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism.

In 2014, following a European Medicines Agency (EMA) review of valproate, the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) circulated recommendations to further restrict the use of valproate in women and girls. The HPRA also recommended that the use of valproate be restricted to doctors experienced in managing epilepsy or bipolar disorder in female patients, and provided advice for situations where it was considered that valproate treatment needed to be continued during the pregnancy.

In March 2017, the Pharmacovigilance Risk Assessment Committee (PRAC) of the EMA initiated a new review of the use of valproate-containing medicines in the treatment of women and girls who are pregnant or of childbearing age. This review has now been completed, and the committee's recommendations were published by the EMA in February. The key measures recommended by the PRAC are as follows:

- Valproate must not be used in pregnancy for the treatment of migraine or bipolar disorder.
- Valproate should not be used in pregnancy for the treatment of epilepsy. However it is recognised that for some women with epilepsy it may not be possible to stop valproate and they may have to continue treatment (with appropriate specialist care) in pregnancy.
- Valproate must not be used in female patients from the time they become able to have children – unless the conditions of a new pregnancy prevention programme (PPP) are met.
- The PRAC has also recommended that the outer packaging of all valproate medicines must include a visual warning about the risks in pregnancy. In addition to boxed text, this may include a symbol/pictogram, with the details to be adapted at national level.
- A patient reminder card will also be attached to the outer package for pharmacists to discuss with the patient each time the medicine is dispensed.
- Companies that market valproate should also provide updated educational materials in the form of guides for healthcare professionals and patients.

The PRAC's position on sodium valproate has since been endorsed by an EMA regulatory committee, the Co-ordination Group for Mutual Recognition and Decentralised Procedures – Human (CMDh), and the recommendations will now be sent to the European Commission for a legally binding decision on all member states. Officials in my department are already working with other stakeholders, including the HPRA, HSE, and the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland, to determine how these recommendations should be implemented in Ireland.

At my request, officials from my department met with representatives from FACS (Foetal Anti-Convulsant Syndrome) Forum Ireland in November. I have been briefed by officials as to the issues raised, and I am scheduled to hold a further meeting with this group today, 28 March.

Home Care Packages Provision

228. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if a home care package will be facilitated in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14477/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Hospital Staff Recruitment

229. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Health his views on the reason that since 2011 it has proved difficult to attract permanent specialists to the north west region, in particular to Sligo University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14479/18]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service issue, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

Services for People with Disabilities

230. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be transferred from County Galway to Dublin (details supplied) due to the exceptional medical circumstances; the reason for the delay in issuing the funding for this transfer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14483/18]

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 an individual case, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

Knowledge Transfer Programme

231. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a knowledge transfer payment will issue to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14285/18]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Knowledge Transfer (KT) is one of a suite of measures included under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 and involves the formation of knowledge transfer groups across the beef, dairy, equine, sheep, tillage and poultry sectors. Farmer participants attend group meetings and produce a Farm Improvement Plan in consultation with their KT Facilitator. For each year of the three year programme participants receive a reimbursement in the amount of €750 for a primary sector and €375 for a secondary sector where all requirements of the programme have been met.

According to my Department's records, the persons named did not complete the Animal Health Measures with a Department approved veterinarian in Year One as required under the programme. Consequently a reduced payment is due in this case. The payment will, as required by the governing EU regulation, issue via the approved KT Facilitator shortly.

Basic Payment Scheme Appeals

232. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a decision will be made on a basic payment scheme appeal by a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14305/18]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department actively investigates incidents of illegal burning as the lands affected are deemed ineligible for the purposes of the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS).

As part of this process, the person named was notified by my Department in relation to burned land that formed part of their BPS application, and has submitted an appeal in relation to this matter.

The processing of this appeal is currently being finalised, and a decision in this matter will be communicated directly to the person named shortly.

Pigmeat Sector

233. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures to be implemented at national and or EU level to support pig producers in view of recent pressure on prices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14336/18]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Price volatility is a significant challenge for the pig sector and developments over the last few years emphasise the cyclical nature of prices in the sector. Current prices, which stand at €138.7/100kg are 16% below prices at the same time in 2017, which was an exceptional year for pig prices, but remain above price in the same period in 2016.

My Department has made a concerted effort to support market diversification. The importance of this is illustrated by the significant expansion in Ireland's pig meat exports to East Asia, and to China in particular. The uncertainty surrounding Brexit lends an even greater importance to the expansion of access to international markets.

In June of last year I visited Mexico, now the fourth largest global importer of chilled and frozen pork. With Mexican demand continuing to grow I have made access to that market a priority. I also travelled to Japan and South Korea last autumn to promote the development of further opportunities for Irish producers in these markets as I want to continue to diversify the range of markets to which Ireland has access. Exports to Japan more than doubled to €22m in 2017, putting it in second place in international markets. We can reasonably expect that the new free trade agreement with Japan (JEEPA) will further enhance trade opportunities. Growth in the Philippines was also strong, up 54 % making it the third largest international market for Irish pigmeat exports.

With Irish production up almost 1% in 2017 and export value increasing some 14% to an estimated €712m, I intend to continue to work closely with the sector and, by focusing on insight-led growth strategies, to take advantage of opportunities for Irish pig meat exporters on international markets.

TAMS Eligibility

234. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if financial assistance is available from his Department, farming organisations or European funding for farmers who require underpasses to access their land which may be crossed by regional roads in cases in which local authorities will not allow entrances onto the road; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14343/18]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The suite of seven measures available under the TAMS Scheme provides support for a large number of investments for farmers in different sectors including tillage, pigs, poultry, beef and dairy.

Payments under the Scheme to date have exceeded €47.7m and continue to issue on a weekly basis as payment claims are submitted by approved participants. To date, approvals have issued to over 13,000 applicants under the scheme. Over 4,000 of these approved applicants have completed works and submitted a payment claim. Until the remaining outstanding approvals for works are completed and a payment claim submitted or the outstanding approvals lapse these cases represent potential payments and a budgetary provision must be maintained for their payment. No further items, including underpasses, can be considered for inclusion under the TAMS Scheme until the budgetary position becomes clearer as the Scheme progresses.

Common Agricultural Policy Negotiations

235. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the outcome of discussions at the recent EU agriculture Council of Ministers meeting in relation to the need to increase the CAP budget post-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14378/18]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): An EU Agriculture Council of Ministers was held on 19 March 2018. The main item on the Council agenda was the Presidency's draft council conclusions on CAP post 2020, which ran to 40 paragraphs. The aim of the draft Council conclusions is to provide guidance to the European Commission on the drafting of legislative proposals, which are expected to be published in early June 2018.

In the event, it was not possible to achieve the required unanimous agreement for Council conclusions, however Presidency conclusions were issued covering a wide range of issues that arise in CAP reform.

The determination of budgetary ceilings, including those of the Common Agricultural Policy, is a matter for Finance Ministers. Nonetheless Minister of State Doyle who represented Ireland at the most recent Council of Agriculture Ministers indicated that the EU will need as strong a budget as possible to deliver on the many objectives of the Common Agricultural Policy. Ireland has been very consistent on this issue in recent months especially as discussions around potential increases in GNI contributions have been floated. The Taoiseach, in his address to the European Parliament in January 2018, has already indicated that Ireland is open to contributing more to the EU budget, but only if it is spent on policies that contribute to the advancement of the European ideal.

Both I and my colleague Minister of State Doyle will continue to argue for as strong a CAP budget as possible as negotiations on CAP post 2020 intensify.

GLAS Applications

236. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a person (details supplied) will receive a GLAS payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14382/18]

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 payments in respect of the 2015 scheme year.

The outstanding Nutrient Management Plan has now been correctly submitted to the system operated by Teagasc. The case is now being processed through the required validation checks. Once the application passes all the required validation checks it will be processed for payment. Payments continue to issue on a weekly basis.

Departmental Staff Data

237. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the percentage of persons employed in his Department that have a disability, expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14431/18]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The percentages of persons in my Department with a disability are as follows:

- Full Time FTE percentage = 4.28%

- Headcount Percentage = 4.08%

Under Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 (Section 47(4)), a public body shall ensure, unless there is good reason to the contrary for not doing so, that not less than 3% of the persons employed by it are persons with disabilities. In that regard I am pleased to state my Department has consistently exceeded the 3% target since 2008.

Waste Management

238. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the action he plans to take to deal with the price increases imposed by a company (details supplied) for recycling material with particular reference to areas in which no alternative provider exists. [14284/18]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten): The charges applied by waste management companies are matters for those companies and their customers, subject to compliance with all applicable environmental and other relevant legislation, including contract and consumer legislation.

In terms of environmental requirements, the charges applied should encourage householders to divert waste from the residual or general waste bin. For example, it would be expected that charges for the general waste bin would be higher than charges, if any, applied to the recycle bin.

The Government has funded a range of measures to support better recycling and reduce contamination of waste, including:

- a national, standardised list of items that can go into the recycle bin has been established, which is available at <http://recyclinglistireland.ie/>;

- this standardised list has been supported by a public education campaign run by the regional waste management authorities, comprising radio advertisements, social media, billboards/posters, etc., to promote the new list; and,

- a ‘master recycling’ programme, also run by the regional waste management authorities, in partnership with environmental NGOs, to roll out 650 workshops across the country training recycling ambassadors to bring the recycling message and understanding to a wide variety of communities.

Almost all paper and plastic packaging is governed by EU internal market and packaging legislation. In that context, as Minister, I have called on the European Union to urgently consider collectively banning single-use plastic items on foot of the EU Plastic Strategy to further protect the environment and to help alleviate the impact of the decision by China to restrict its intake of recyclable waste.

In addition, I have also provided Government funding to support and encourage better separation of waste through a number of initiatives such as:

- the Stop Food Waste programme www.stopfoodwaste.ie, which is implemented under the Environmental Protection Agency’s National Waste Prevention Programme and is aimed at both householders and businesses, providing comprehensive information about the food that is wasted and how to prevent this, and,

- the development of a website www.brownbins.ie to provide the public with the information required to use the organic bin appropriately, including advice on the optimal methods for effective collection and storage of food waste.

In terms of pricing, I established a Household Waste Collection Price Monitoring Group (PMG) last year to monitor the rates charged by household waste collectors during the phasing out of flat rate fees. The PMG has met each month since September 2017 and has considered six months of pricing data trends. The PMG has indicated that, in the vast majority of cases to date, prices have remained stable. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) is also currently conducting a separate study on the operation of the household waste collection market which it will complete in 2018.

The results from the PMG are being monitored, and in conjunction with the study being undertaken by the CCPC, will provide an evidence base for future decisions in relation to the need for further regulation of the waste market.

Illegal Dumping

239. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if an impact statement has been commissioned in relation to the likely increase in illegal dumping as a result of the increase in bin charges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14373/18]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten): Charges applied by waste management companies are matters for those companies and their customers, subject to compliance with all applicable environmental and other relevant legislation, including contract and consumer legislation. In terms of environmental legislation,

the charges applied should encourage householders to divert waste from the residual or general waste bin. For example, it would be expected that charges for the general waste bin would be higher than charges, if any, applied to the recycle bin.

The response from community and voluntary groups across the country to my Department's anti-dumping initiative demonstrates that the vast majority of our people treasure and respect our environment and continue to manage their waste responsibly. That is why I have allocated €2 million to support the programme this year to build on the momentum that has now been created and to put an increased emphasis on identifying and initiating enforcement actions on those who facilitate the unauthorised movement and disposal of waste. My Department is also supporting the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities in commissioning a report on crime in the waste sector in Ireland including a root cause assessment of illegal dumping and best practice for outreach and prevention.

Penalties for serious dumping offences provided for under the Waste Management Acts are substantial. Persons who are found to be responsible for, or involved in, the unauthorised disposal of waste are liable to a maximum fine of €5,000 on summary conviction and/or imprisonment for up to 12 months, and to a maximum fine of €15 million on conviction on indictment and/or imprisonment for up to 10 years.

It should also be noted that, under new bye-laws, local authorities are establishing registers which record the details of households which are using the services of an authorised waste operator (whether a kerbside collector, pay to use compactor or civic amenity facility). In gathering these details from service providers, local authorities may use this information to target households which appear not to be managing their waste correctly or using the services of an unauthorised operator. This data will support a number of awareness, education and enforcement programmes already initiated by individual local authorities.

Inland Fisheries Ireland

240. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the reason Inland Fisheries Ireland has banned salmon fishing on the lower River Shannon for conservation reasons in view of the fact that the amount of salmon caught in recent years on the river was well above the number required to allow this activity to continue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14357/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Kyne): Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) is the state agency responsible for the protection, management and conservation of Ireland's inland fisheries and sea angling resources. IFI manages salmon stocks on an individual river basis as each of Ireland's 147 salmon rivers (including river sections and estuaries) has its own genetically unique stock of salmon.

IFI is supported in its management role by the independent Standing Scientific Committee (SSC), comprising scientists from a range of organisations. Scientific and management assessments of each of the distinct stocks, including those on the River Shannon, are carried out every year with IFI engaged in an extensive stock monitoring which feeds into the scientific committee's annual reviews.

The SSC estimates the number of salmon likely to return to each river in the next fishing season based on estimates of salmon runs over the most recent five years. Each river has an individual conservation limit which is essentially the number of salmon required to spawn to maintain a healthy population. If the estimate of returning salmon is above this limit, then

salmon from that genetically unique river population may be harvested commercially or by rod and line.

The lower Shannon region comprises not only the main river channel but also the other rivers, including the Fergus, Mulcair and Maigue for which assessments are carried out. No harvestable surplus of salmon is available in the Region as the catch and counter records indicate that wild salmon returns are very significantly below conservation limits. I will provide a detailed account of the scientific salmon stock assessment process and status for rivers in the Lower Shannon region for the Deputy.

The salmon assessment methodologies used in Ireland are considered internationally as best practice, with many other countries moving towards the development of similar scientific assessment models for salmon stock conservation.

Departmental Staff Data

241. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the percentage of persons employed in his Department that have a disability, expressed in whole time-equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14434/18]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten): My Department is committed to a policy of equality of opportunity for all staff and supports the “Code of Practice for the Employment of People with Disabilities in the Civil Service”, published by the Department of Finance in 2007. The latest statutory report under the Disability Act 2005 by my Department for end of 2017, reported that 3.1% of staff in head-count terms, and 3.27% in whole-time equivalents, have disclosed a disability. My Department currently meets the 3% target for the employment of people with disabilities as set by the 2005 Disability Act.

Electricity Grid

242. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the details of the 2017 or most recent electricity consumption level for the island of Ireland and in Northern Ireland; the most recent annual figure for the different energy sources used in the island and in Northern Ireland that generated this power; and the projected electricity needed in 2030 to supply the Island. [14478/18]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten): Details in relation to All-Island electricity system demand and fuel mix are publicly available on the EirGrid website at <http://www.eirgridgroup.com/>. EirGrid’s “All-Island Generation Capacity Statement” (pages 14 and 15) provides details of the 2016 generation fuel mix for both Ireland and Northern Ireland. The document is available at http://www.eirgridgroup.com/site-files/library/EirGrid/4289_EirGrid_GenCapStatement_v9_web.pdf

In Ireland in 2016, final consumption of electricity reached 29,413 GWh while the corresponding figure for Northern Ireland was 8,892 GWh. The following table provides a breakdown of 2016 generation in Ireland by technologies on a percentage basis.

Generation Technology	Proportions of electricity generated (%) (2016)
Oil	1.0%
Peat	7.7%
Coal	15.6%
Natural Gas	50.6%
Wind(normalised)	20.4%(22.3%)
Hydro(normalised)	2.3%(2.5%)
Other Renewables & Wastes	2.5%
Total	100%

Additional information can be found in section 2.6 of the latest version of the SEAI publication “Energy in Ireland” which is available at

<https://www.seai.ie/resources/publications/Energy-in-Ireland-1990-2016-Full-report.pdf>

In regard to future electricity demand, EirGrid have modelled a number of scenarios in their 2017 publication “Tomorrow’s Energy Scenarios”. Each scenario predicts a different possible future for the generation and consumption of electricity out to 2040. A link to the document is available at

<http://www.eirgridgroup.com/site-files/library/EirGrid/EirGrid-Tomorrows-Energy-Scenarios-Report-2017.pdf>

State Airports

243. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the reasoning for his decision to appoint Fingal County Council as the competent authority in relation to the implementation of EU Regulation 5981/4; the way in which the local authority will play that role in Shannon, Cork and all the other regional airports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14316/18]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Once it was clear that the option of designating the Irish Aviation Authority as the competent authority was no longer available, the decision was taken - following extensive discussions - that Fingal County Council was best suited to undertake the role. Fingal County Council already has responsibilities under the EU Environmental Noise Directive which encapsulates responsibilities relating to noise caused by conurbations and major transport infrastructures, including roads, railways and airports. In addition, having regard to its planning functions, it has considerable experience and expertise in the conduct of environmental impact assessments, appropriate assessments and in managing extensive public consultations. There are therefore considerable synergies arising from the assignment of this additional role.

As regards how this may affect airports other than Dublin, EU Regulation 598/2014 only applies to airports with more than 50,000 civil aircraft movements per calendar year, and so it only applies to Dublin Airport for now, and for the far foreseeable future.

The full details of how the Regulation will be implemented, including the role and responsibilities of Fingal County Council, will be set out in primary legislation, the drafting of which has commenced in my Department.

State Airports

244. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the senior management person or persons designated by the DAA to act as community liaison representatives in view of substantial changes to the management team; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14318/18]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I assume that the context of this question relates to the North Runway project at Dublin Airport, which is the responsibility of the daa.

The duties assigned to members of the senior management team at daa in relation to this project are a matter for the company, and as Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have no function in this matter.

However, in order to be of assistance, I have forwarded the Deputy's query to daa for attention and direct reply. If you do not hear from daa within 10 working days, please contact my private office.

Cycling Facilities Provision

245. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if upgrade works will be carried out along a stretch of the Royal Canal cycleway and walkway between Laurel Lodge and the bridge at Porterstown, which is in a poor state of repair; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14326/18]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As the Deputy is aware, as Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public and sustainable transport. In Budget 2018 I have secured over €110 million which is being allocated to develop cycling and walking infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area, and in the cities of Galway, Limerick, Cork and Waterford over the period 2018-2021. This programme will provide safe alternative active travel routes to help alleviate congestion by providing viable alternatives and connectivity with existing public transport infrastructure.

I am not, however, involved in the day-to-day delivery of walking and cycling infrastructure. This falls to the National Transport Authority who have advised that works under the Royal Canal Greenway project are included in this year's programme of works.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred your question to the NTA for a more detailed reply with regard to this particular project. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Sports Capital Programme

246. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the way in which lottery grants and other capital grants are administered and awarded by his Department; the specific rules that apply; if a voluntary community group (details supplied) will be considered for a grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14341/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Bren-

dan Griffin): The Sports Capital Programme (SCP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. It is part funded from the proceeds of the National Lottery and the full terms and conditions of the SCP are available on my Department's website.

It will be open to any organisation, including the organisation referred to by the Deputy, to apply for funding under any future rounds of the SCP. In this regard, my Department is undertaking a review of the 2017 round with a view to making recommendations on how to improve the process for future calls. This work is also examining what is feasible in terms of the scale and timing of the next round. I expect this review to be complete in the coming months and an announcement regarding the next round will be made at that stage.

Road Safety

247. **Deputy Tom Neville** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when Transport Infrastructure Ireland will finalise clarification on issues raised as a result of a submission by Limerick City and County Council on speed limits on national roads in the county; and when this process to be completed. [14356/18]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland 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.

Sports Capital Programme

248. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his Department has engaged with the Department of Education and Skills to resolve the problem of invalidated capital sport grants for primary schools that applied for funds on lands they do not own; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14359/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): In recent rounds of the Sports Capital Programme (SCP), an issue was identified for certain schools located on lands owned by the Minister of Education and Skills being able to fulfil the standard title requirements of the programme.

My officials have been engaging with the Department of Education and Skills with a view to resolving the issue and a draft mechanism has now been agreed. Subject to confirmation from the Departments' legal advisors that the proposed solution is in order, I expect that the relevant schools would be able to apply for funding when the next round of the SCP opens for applications.

More generally, my Department is undertaking a review of the 2017 round with a view to making recommendations on how to improve the process for future calls. This work is also looking at eligibility criteria and my officials will be engaging further with the Department of Education and Skills in this regard. I expect this review to be complete in the coming months

and an announcement regarding the next round of the Sports Capital Programme will be made at that stage.

Driver Test Waiting Lists

249. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of persons waiting for driver tests in County Kerry; the length of time they have been on the waiting list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14390/18]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): This is a matter for the Road Safety Authority. I have referred the question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response is not received within 10 days.

Road Tolls

250. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if there are plans to use laser and credit card facilities at tolls. [14410/18]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy in relation to roads. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects on national roads are a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 in conjunction with the relevant local authority. For regional and local roads it is a matter for each respective local authority.

More specifically, the statutory powers to levy tolls on national roads as well as regional and local roads, to make toll bye-laws and to enter into toll agreements with private investors are vested in TII (for national roads) and each local authority (for regional and local roads) under Part V of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended by the Planning and Development Act 2000 and the Roads Act 2007). The use of laser and credit card facilities at toll collection points is therefore within the operational responsibility of TII.

Noting the above, I am referring the question to TII for direct reply within 10 working days. Please inform my private office if you do not receive the information.

Departmental Staff Data

251. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the percentage of persons employed in his Department who have a disability expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14447/18]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is subject to specific legal obligations under the Disability Act 2005. Part 5 of the Act sets out a requirement for public service bodies to meet a target of 3% of employees with disabilities each year.

Staff in the Department provide information relating to disabilities on a voluntary disclosure basis and do not provide details as to whether or not they are registered disabled with the relevant representative disability organisation/agency.

In the most recent report on the matter submitted by my Department to the National Disability Authority in March 2018, there were 19 full-time employees, with a disclosed disability as at 31st December 2017, employed by my Department. In whole time equivalent terms this represented 3.9% of the total workforce. In terms of actual head count this represented 3.6% of the total workforce.

Early Childhood Care and Education Programmes

252. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if assistance will be provided to a person (details supplied) regarding a matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14398/18]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): AIM is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with a disability can access the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. The key objective of AIM is to support pre-school providers to deliver an inclusive pre-school experience, ensuring that children with a disability can fully participate in the ECCE programme, thereby reaping the benefits of quality pre-school education.

AIM is a child-centred model, involving seven levels of progressive support, moving from the universal to the targeted, based on the needs of the child and the pre-school setting. AIM was launched in June 2016 and is administered by Pobal on behalf of the DCYA.

Level 7 of AIM provides additional assistance in the pre-school room where this is critical to ensuring a child's participation in the ECCE Programme. In line with emerging best practice to support the integration and independence of children with a disability, AIM does not fund Special Needs Assistants (SNAs).

Once Pobal awards Level 7 support to a pre-school, the pre-school can decide to either reduce the child to adult ratio in the pre-school room or to buy in additional assistance to the pre-school room through a recruitment process (if the pre-school does not have access to a staff member to fulfil this role as is the case for most smaller pre-schools). In the normal course of events, the recruitment process can take several weeks as the pre-school will have to advertise, review applications, interview candidates, carry out Garda vetting and agree a start date with the successful candidate.

Neither Pobal nor my Department have a role in the recruitment of staff for pre-schools. However, the local CCC funded by my Department would be willing to support recruitment of additional assistance to deliver Level 7 supports and have done so for other settings in the county.

Departmental Funding

253. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the way in which lottery grants and other capital grants are administered by her Department; if a group (details supplied) will be considered for a grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14340/18]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Department of Children and Youth Affairs operated a discretionary National Lottery Funding Scheme some years ago in which grants were allocated to community groups and programmes to support

children, young people and families. The scheme closed in 2014.

My Department currently has resources at its disposal to support a number of capital schemes, including youth related activities, and details of these are available on my Department's website. Unfortunately, the project mentioned by the Deputy does not appear to fall under the qualifying conditions of any of these schemes.

Early Childhood Care and Education

254. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if an extra year on the ECCE scheme will be awarded to a child (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14407/18]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): Current policy requires that any request for an overage exemption from ECCE eligibility criteria must be supported by a letter from a HSE/Medical Specialist (not a GP/PHN) specifically recommending an extra year of pre-school for the child. This requirement is not intended to undermine the view of any parent/teachers/GP/PHN etc. in relation to a child's needs but, rather, to maintain a clear and standard basis for applying for exemptions.

Examples of the type of specialist/medical letters accepted in order to approve an exemption are as follows:

Speech and Language Therapist

Occupational Therapist

Senior Psychologist

Neurologist

Psychiatrist

Cardiologist

Oncologist

Ophthalmologist

Otolaryngologist (ENT Specialist)

Gastroenterologist

This is not an exhaustive list, however it provides an example of what may be accepted.

All ECCE overage exemption requests must be sent to my Department via email: eyqueries@dcya.gov.ie or alternatively by post: Overage Exemptions, Early Years, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 43-49 Mespil Rd, Dublin 4.

As soon as my Department receives the documentation requested, the application will be processed.

Departmental Staff Data

255. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the percentage of persons employed in her Department who have a disability expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14433/18]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 sets out the legal obligations of public service bodies to meet a target of 3% of employees with disabilities. Under the Act, the National Disability Authority (NDA) has the statutory role to report, on an annual basis, on compliance with the 3% target.

My Department reported a total of 6.32% of staff based on Headcount (6.72% of staff based on whole time equivalents) who had declared a disability as at the 31st December 2016.

Data in relation to end 2017 is currently being compiled.

Leader Programmes Funding

256. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when an additional budget will be allocated to the Leader programme to meet the demand of qualified projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14464/18]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): LEADER is a multi-annual programme for the period 2014-2020 which has a total budget of €250 million over the programming period. The programme is administered by Local Action Groups (LAGs) which deliver funding in accordance with Local Development Strategies that have been agreed for each LEADER sub-regional area.

€220 million of the available funding has already been allocated to the 28 LEADER sub-regional areas throughout the country. The allocation for each sub-regional area is provided for the duration of the programme rather than on an annual basis. This provides greater flexibility to the LAGs in managing their resources. Each LAG is responsible for deciding how their allocation is distributed to LEADER projects over the duration of the programme, based on the objectives in their Local Development Strategies. T

In addition to the €220 million which has been allocated to the LAGs, a further €30 million in funding is available for schemes which will be administered at a national level. These include a specific scheme to fund food projects which will be launched shortly, and funding to support LAGs that come together to jointly deliver a LEADER project.

Funding is available in my Department's Vote to meet the projected expenditure under the LEADER programme on a year-by-year basis.

As of 25 March 2018, 839 projects with a value of €24 million had been approved for LEADER funding by the LAGs, while a further 313 projects requesting over €17 million in funding are at various stages in the approval process. This funding will be drawn down as projects start to incur expenditure and submit payment claims.

I am confident that the funding available in my Department's Vote for 2018 for the LEADER Programme is sufficient to meet the expected draw-downs; however, the position will be kept under review by my Department.

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

257. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when he plans to launch a further round of the town and village renewal scheme in 2018; the status of phase 1 and phase 2 of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14406/18]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Town and Village Renewal Scheme was first launched in 2016, with funding of €10 million allocated for that year to 170 projects. An enhanced Town and Village Renewal scheme was announced in 2017, with an emphasis on projects that would have a sustainable and visible impact on towns or villages and their environs, and could demonstrate economic impact or potential.

Last October, I announced the allocation of €21.6 million to 281 projects in towns and villages across rural Ireland under the 2017 scheme. These projects will be delivered over a 15 month period. Local Authorities are currently in the process of completing or delivering the projects approved under the 2016 and 2017 schemes.

I intend to launch a new call for proposals under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme shortly, and will again be placing an emphasis on projects that can demonstrate strong economic benefits for towns, villages and their environs. I have secured an allocation of €15 million in my Department's Estimate for this year's Town and Village Renewal Scheme.

In addition, a pilot scheme to encourage residential occupancy in rural towns and villages is currently being developed as part of the Town and Village Renewal Scheme. The pilot will consider ways in which properties that are currently not in use in town centres can be renovated to allow them to be used for residential purposes. This will help to rejuvenate town centres while also contributing to the housing needs of individuals. I have established a Steering Group to accelerate and oversee the design and delivery of this pilot scheme.

Departmental Staff Data

258. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the percentage of persons employed in his Department who have a disability expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14445/18]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Department of Rural and Community Development was established on 19th July 2017 to provide a renewed and consolidated focus on rural and community development in Ireland.

The Department is an equal opportunities employer and is fully committed to addressing the health and safety needs of all employees, including employees with disabilities. Section 47(1) (a) of the Disability Act 2005 requires public bodies to take all reasonable measures to promote and support the employment of persons with disabilities. To assist the Department in fulfilling its obligations under the Act a Departmental Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) was appointed in December 2017. The Department's DLO is a member of the Civil Service Disability Liaison Network, which promotes and disseminates best practice in relation to the employment of people with disabilities.

The role of the DLO will be to ensure that the Department meets its obligations under relevant employment legislation as well as adhering to best practice guidelines in relation to the employment of people with disabilities, including those outlined in the Code of Practice for the Employment of people with Disabilities in the Civil Service (2007).

The DLO will undertake a survey of staff in Q2 2018, to establish the proportion of staff (and those in the Agencies under our remit) with a disability.

Once identified, the DLO will take all appropriate measures to assist staff with disabilities, including the provision of training, support and guidance, as appropriate.

In addition the Department is currently participating in the WAM (Willing Able Mentoring) programme. The WAM programme offers graduates with disabilities work experience and gives practical effect to Government and Civil Service policy on improving the employment prospects for people with disabilities.

Social Welfare Code

259. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the rate of PRSI payable is the same for S class self-employed persons at 4% and A1 class employees; if so, the reason they are not entitled to the same social welfare benefits, in particular jobseeker's benefit; her plans to extend the same benefits to self employed persons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14401/18]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Self-employed workers who earn €5,000 or more in a contribution year, are liable for PRSI at the class S rate of 4%, subject to a minimum annual payment of €500. This provides them with access to the following benefits: State pension (contributory), widow's, widower's or surviving civil partner's pension (contributory), guardian's payment (contributory), maternity benefit, adoptive benefit, paternity benefit, treatment benefit (from March 2017). Entitlement to invalidity pension was extended to the self-employed from December 2017.

This compares favourably with employees who, in general, are liable to the PRSI Class A rate of 4%. In addition, their employers are liable to PRSI at the rate of 8.6% on weekly earnings up to and including €376 or at the rate of 10.85% where weekly earnings exceed €376. Accordingly the combined rate of PRSI rate paid in respect of Class A employees is 12.6% or 14.85%, depending on the level of weekly earnings. These Class A employees are entitled to the full range of social insurance benefits.

The issue of extending additional social insurance benefits to the self-employed paying Class S PRSI was considered in the Actuarial Review of the Social Insurance fund (SIF) as at 31 December, 2015, which I published in October 2017. The review, required by legislation, was carried out by independent consultants, KPMG. It examines the projected income and expenditure of the SIF over the course of the 55 year period from 2016 to 2071.

The review found that the fund currently has a modest surplus of income over expenditure. In 2016 there was a surplus of €0.4 billion on expenditure of €8.8 billion and receipts of €9.2 billion. However, this will reduce over the next two years and will return to a small shortfall in 2020. The annual shortfalls are projected to increase from 2021 onwards as the ageing of the population impacts. Projections indicate that, in the absence of further action to tackle the shortfall, the excess of expenditure over income of the fund will increase significantly over the medium to long term. The shortfall in expenditure over income is projected to increase from €0.2 billion in 2020 to €3.3 billion by 2030 and to €22.2 billion by 2071. It should be noted that as self-employed workers were to be eligible to apply for invalidity pension from December 2017, the cost of this introduction has been factored into the actuarial review's findings.

As part of the review the independent consultants were required to project the additional PRSI expenditure if invalidity pension and illness, jobseeker's and carer's benefits were ex-

tended to Class S self-employed workers and the PRSI contribution rates required to provide these benefits on a revenue neutral basis.

The review found that the combined cost of introducing the invalidity, illness, jobseeker's and carer's benefits for PRSI Class S contributions is estimated to be €118 million in 2018, rising steadily to €223 million in 2020. By 2025 the projected cost is €413 million and, over the period of the review the cost would rise to €1.3 billion in 2071.

The review indicates that, where these benefits are extended to the self-employed, the Class S rate of PRSI contribution would need to increase substantially in order to ensure that the benefits are delivered in a revenue neutral manner. It estimates that when expenditure on the additional benefits is considered over the entire projection period, PRSI rates would need to increase by 94% under a scenario of no subvention from the exchequer. This is equivalent to an increase of the Class S contribution rate from the current 4% rate to 7.8%.

This increased contribution is attributable to the costs of extending these additional benefits to PRSI Class S contributors. It does not take account of the value to PRSI Class S contributors of access to the range of existing benefits, and in particular State pension contributory. The consultants estimated that the typical cost of State pension (contributory) on its own is of the order of 10% to 15%, depending on other factors including rate of average earnings and date of commencing paying PRSI. Adding in the other benefits referenced the total Class S rate of contribution to ensure revenue neutrality would be of the order of 20% per annum.

The Actuarial Review provides government with a timely and evidence-led opportunity to undertake a full review of our social insurance system and to consult with stakeholders. The review will take account of the financial sustainability of the Fund given the expected demographic challenges and consideration of extending the scope of benefits for workers generally, including the self-employed.

Local Employment Service

260. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of referrals made to the local employment service in each of the years 2013 to 2017. [14286/18]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Local Employment Services form part of the State's public employment service. This service is managed by the Department of Social Protection and delivered directly by its own Intreo service as well as by contractors, such as JobPath, Local Employment Service, and Job Club providers.

The expansion of the department's activation capacity with the introduction of JobPath and the welcome reduction in the live register has allowed the department over the last two years to develop the activation service provided by the Local Employment Services (LES) across 12 Counties.

In 2016, LES providers were asked to increase the frequency with which they engage with activation jobseekers to enhance the quality of the services they provide. To facilitate this more intensive engagement, the Department reduced the number of people referred to the LES for the purpose of reducing caseloads so as to maintain a maximum caseload 120:1 per case officer.

The LES were also requested to increase the time they allocate to work with each individual jobseeker and in 2017 bands were introduced with set engagement patterns so that a LES case officer with 101-120 clients would be expected to have monthly meetings with the clients, 81-

100 clients every three weeks and 80 or fewer client every two weeks.

Smaller caseloads are key to providing the one to one intensive type of engagement which long term unemployed clients benefit from most.

The following table shows the referrals to the Local Employment Service each year from 2013 to 2017.

Referrals 2013	Referrals 2014	Referrals 2015	Referrals 2016	Referrals 2017
63,270	67,314	N/A*	21,209	18,498

*Due to a change in the Department's case management system during 2015, it is not possible to provide accurate referral figures for that year.

Community Employment Schemes Data

261. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of referrals made to community employment in each of the years 2013 to 2017. [14287/18]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department does not record the numbers who are referred to Community Employment (CE) centrally but rather the numbers who take up CE.

The following table provides detail on the number of the participants which started each year in the period 2013 – 2017.

Year	Participants
2013	9,614
2014	12,102
2015	11,915
2016	11,010
2017	10,527

The following table outlines the position in relation to the number of persons engaged in Community Employment as at the end of December for each year from 2013 to 2017.

Year	Participants	Supervisors	Total
2013	22,575	1,368	23,943
2014	23,249	1,396	24,645
2015	22,813	1,405	24,218
2016	22,356	1,377	23,733
2017	21,832	1,357	23,189

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Tús Programme

262. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of referrals made to Tús in each of the years 2013 to 2017. [14288/18]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The

information requested is not readily available and is currently being compiled by my Department. The information will be provided to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Rural Social Scheme Data

263. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of referrals made to the rural social scheme in each of the years 2013 to 2017. [14289/18]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The rural social scheme (RSS) is an income support initiative which provides part-time employment opportunities in community and voluntary organisations for farmers or fishermen who are in receipt of certain social welfare payments and underemployed in their primary occupation. The RSS is a supplementary income support scheme.

RSS is delivered through 35 Local Development Companies and Údarás Na Gaeltachta. Participants must continue to be actively farming/fishing and retain entitlement to the underlying qualifying DSP payment in order to retain eligibility for participation on RSS. The Department do not refer people to the RSS. Participation is by voluntary self-selection and is dependent on the availability of vacancies in the relevant locality. Applications are made direct to the relevant Local Development Company.

JobPath Data

264. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of referrals made to JobPath in each of the years 2015 to 2017. [14290/18]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): As the Deputy will be aware, JobPath is a service that supports people who are long-term unemployed to obtain and sustain paid employment. The service was launched in 2015 on a 'rolling basis' with referral numbers gradually increasing over time.

As of the end of February 2018, just over 151,000 people had commenced their engagement period with the service. This figure is broken down by year in the following table.

Year	Number of clients to commence engagement with service
2015	6,588
2016	65,253
2017	73,122
2018	6,399
Total	151,362

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Schemes

265. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will examine the possibility of allowing those on a qualified adult payment to access schemes such as community employment, Tús and the rural social scheme, to avail of upskill-

ing thus benefitting local communities through these schemes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14291/18]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Within the social welfare system and subject to the qualifying conditions of the particular scheme, a primary claimant may apply for payment of an increase for a qualified adult (IQA) in respect of a dependent spouse, civil partner or cohabitant.

Generally, persons in respect of whom IQA payments are being made are free to make an application for a social welfare payment in their own right. For example, where a person of working age is a qualified adult on their spouse's jobseeker's benefit or allowance claim that person may claim jobseeker's benefit or allowance in their own right. If the claim is successful, the increase for a qualified adult ceases to be payable to the spouse. In this way equality of access is provided.

Access to work schemes for job-seekers, such as Community Employment and Tus, is conditional on a person having been continually unemployed – that is, available for, seeking and failing to find employment for a period of time, typically at least a year – and thus having been shown to be particularly in need of assistance. There are no plans to alter these requirements, and it would be administratively impossible to establish such continual unemployment other than by reference to continuous receipt of a relevant income support payment.

The Deputy should note that qualified adults may be eligible for the rural social scheme (RSS), which is aimed at low-income farmers and fishermen/women through spousal swaps. If a person eligible for the RSS does not wish to participate on the RSS, his/her dependent spouse/civil partner/cohabitant can apply in their place. In these instances, the person originally qualified must give up his/her qualifying social welfare payment if his/her spouse/civil partner/cohabitant is accepted on the RSS.

Carer's Allowance Payments

266. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason a carer's allowance was ceased for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14292/18]

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

The Department periodically reviews claims in payment to ensure that there is continued entitlement.

Following a review in this case, which involved an investigation by a local social welfare inspector, it was decided that the person concerned was no longer providing full-time care and attention as required.

The person concerned was notified on 24 January 2018 of this decision, the reason for it and of his right of review and appeal.

The person concerned has recently submitted additional evidence in support of a review and on 21 March 2018, the Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) notified us that an appeal had been requested.

A submission in support of the decision is being prepared and will be forwarded along with the file to the SWAO for determination.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Qualified Child Increase Payments

267. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if an adult dependant allowance in respect of a person is payable in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14298/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): The person concerned has had her Increase for Qualified Child (IQC) re-instated with effect from 1 November 2017. The first payment will be made by her preferred payment method on 4 April 2018.

Arrears of payment due have issued to the person concerned.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Employment Support Services

268. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of vacancies throughout the State on community employment, Tús and rural social schemes. [14304/18]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): My Department operates a range of employment support measures which are designed to encourage the unemployed to re-enter the labour market by participating in schemes such as Community Employment (CE), Tús and the Rural Social Scheme (RSS).

The Deputy will appreciate that given the welcome improvements in the labour market in recent years with reducing numbers of long term unemployed on the Live Register, which is the target cohort for CE and Tús, it is proving difficult to fill the number of places available nationwide. Long-term unemployment is expected to fall further this year in line with the continuing forecasted fall in overall unemployment. There has been a 48% fall in the numbers on the Live Register who are more than 1 year unemployed in the five years since the end December 2012.

According to the JobsIreland website, where all CE vacancies are advertised, there were approximately 1,500 CE posts vacant on Monday 26th March 2018.

There are 47 Local Development Companies (LDCs) as well as Údarás na Gaeltachta known as Implementing Bodies (IBs) involved in the delivery of the Tús programme. Those engaged on both Tús and RSS are generally referred to as participants and are the employees of the designated IBs. Nationally, the current Tús quota is for 8,260 participant placements across the 48 IB's. As on 23th March 2018, there were approximately 1,950 participant vacancies nationwide.

As on 16th March 2018, there were 153 participant vacancies on the rural social scheme (RSS). As part of Budget 2018, I announced an additional 250 places on the RSS. These places were allocated to the RSS Implementing bodies with effect from 23rd March 2018 and will be rolled out shortly. This will increase the overall number of places to 3,350.

It should be noted that this data is quite dynamic given the throughput on a number of these schemes. Therefore, the data will change almost weekly for both CE and Tús as participants commence and exit the programmes.

Disability Allowance Appeals

269. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the case of an appeal by a person (details supplied) in relation to a disability allowance refusal will be examined; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14331/18]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all of the available evidence, has decided to allow the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision. The person concerned has been notified of the Appeals Officer's decision.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Illness Benefit Eligibility

270. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the eligibility of a person who is self-employed for illness benefit; the status of support for the self-employed in this area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14333/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): Self-employed persons are liable for PRSI at the Class S rate of 4% which covers them for access to long-term benefits such as State pension (contributory) and widow's, widower's or surviving civil partner's pension (contributory) as well as some treatment benefits, maternity and paternity benefit, adoptive benefit and guardians payment (contributory). Class S contributions do not provide access to short-term social insurance benefits such as illness benefit. However the means tested supplementary welfare allowance scheme may be available to those who are experiencing financial difficulty.

Self-employed contributors have been covered for invalidity pension since December 2017. This gives the self-employed access to a safety-net of income supports if they become permanently incapable of work as a result of a long-term illness or disability without a means test.

I have already indicated the Government's intention to examine the further extension of benefits to self-employed people. In doing this, it will take account of results of the 2017 survey of self-employed workers, which indicated that self-employed people are open to paying a higher rate of social insurance in return for additional benefits, and the actuarial review of the social insurance fund which was undertaken by KPMG and published last year.

The actuarial review found that the combined cost of introducing the invalidity, illness, job-seeker's and carer's benefits for class S contributions is estimated to be €118 million in 2018, rising to €223 million in 2020. The review indicated that PRSI rates for the self-employed would need to increase from the current level of 4% to 7.8% to ensure a revenue neutral outcome.

State Pension (Non-Contributory) Applications

271. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the way in which her Department chose 6 April 2012 as the date for persons 66 years of age to qualify for the changes in the application process for the State pension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14361/18]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Social Welfare Act 1997, in line with the recommendations in the final report of the National Pensions Board, provided for an increase in the number of paid contributions required for entitlement to old age contributory pension from 156 or three years to 520 or ten years. This increase was introduced in two phases with lengthy timescales which recognised the need for a long lead-in time when making fundamental changes to State pension entitlements in order to meet people's expectations and allay fears as much as possible.

There was an increase to 260 paid contributions in the case of a person who reaches pension age on or after 6 April 2002 and an increase to 520 in the case of person who reaches pension age on or after 6 April 2012. The ten years of contributions may comprise an aggregate of 520 qualifying and voluntary contributions of which at least 260 must be qualifying contributions. In addition, a person who was a voluntary contributor on or before 6 April 1997 may qualify on the basis of an aggregate of 520 qualifying or voluntary contributions of which at least 156 must be qualifying contributions.

The Social Welfare Act 1997 was enacted on 2nd April 1997. The increase to 520 contributions was commenced to be effective from a date over 15 years after the legislation introducing it, and this would be considered a reasonable lead-in period for such a change.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Disability Allowance Applications

272. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if an application for a disability allowance by a person (details supplied) will be expedited. [14386/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): I can confirm that an application from this gentleman for disability allowance (DA) was received by the Department on 28 December 2017.

The processing time for individual DA claims may vary in accordance with their relative complexity in terms of the three main qualifying criteria, the person's circumstances and the information they provide in support of their claim.

The application has been referred to a Social Welfare Inspector (SWI) for a report on the person's means and circumstances. Once the SWI has submitted their report to DA section, a decision will be made on the application and this gentleman will be notified directly of the outcome.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Departmental Staff Data

273. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the percentage of persons employed in her Department that have a disability, expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14438/18]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 sets out the legal obligations of public service bodies to promote and support the employment of people with disabilities, comply with any statutory Codes of Practice, meet a target of 3% of employees with disabilities and report every year on achievement of these obligations.

According to the latest staff census figure, compiled for the year ending 31s December 2017, my Department has 339 staff employed that have disclosed a disability or received a workplace accommodation in respect of a disclosed disability. This represents 5% of all staff employed in the Department and exceeds the current 3% employment target for people with disabilities in the Irish Civil Service.

In relation to the three agencies under the aegis of my Department the last figures available as reported to the National Disability Authority were in respect of 2016. The Citizens Information Board reported that 9.64% of all staff employed had disclosed a disability or received a workplace accommodation in respect of a disclosed disability. The Pensions Authority reported that 3.92% of all staff employed had disclosed a disability or received a workplace accommodation in respect of a disclosed disability.

Building Regulations

274. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to introduce a redress scheme for apartments and households which have defects in fire safety standards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14339/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): In general, building defects are matters for resolution between the contracting parties involved, the homeowner, the builder, the developer and/or their respective insurers, structural guarantee or warranty scheme. It is important to note that while my Department has overall responsibility for establishing and maintaining an effective regulatory framework for building standards and building control, it has no general statutory role in resolving defects in privately owned buildings, including dwellings, nor does it have a budget for such matters. In this regard, it is incumbent on the parties responsible for poor workmanship and/or the supply of defective materials to face up to their responsibilities and take appropriate action to provide remedies for the affected homeowners.

Under the Building Control Acts 1990 to 2014, primary responsibility for compliance of works with the requirements of the Building Regulations, including Part B (Fire Safety), rests with the owners, designers and builders of buildings. Enforcement of the Building Regulations is a matter for the 31 local building control authorities, who have extensive powers of inspection and enforcement under the Acts and who are independent in the use of their statutory powers.

In August 2017, I published a Framework for Enhancing Fire Safety in Dwellings, which is intended to be used as a guide by the owners and occupants of dwellings where fire safety deficiencies have been identified, or are a cause for concern. The Framework will also be of assistance to professional advisors both in developing strategies to improve fire safety and in developing strategies to enable continued occupation in advance of undertaking the necessary

works to ensure compliance with the relevant Building Regulations.

It should be noted that in response to the many building failures that emerged in the last decade, my Department has been working on a building control reform agenda, including the following:

- the introduction of the Building Control (Amendment) Regulations 2014, which require greater accountability in relation to compliance with Building Regulations in the form of statutory certification;
- working closely with the Local Government Management Agency on the oversight and governance of the local authority Building Control System to improve its effectiveness; and
- progressing primary legislation, the Building Control (Construction Industry Register Ireland) Bill 2017, to develop and promote a culture of competence, good practice and compliance with the building regulations in the construction sector.

Wind Energy Guidelines

275. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when the new wind farm guidelines will be available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14405/18]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): My Department is currently undertaking a focused review of the 2006 Wind Energy Development Guidelines. As part of the overall review, a strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is being undertaken on the revised Guidelines before they come into effect, in accordance with the requirements of EU Directive 2001/24/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment, otherwise known as the SEA Directive. SEA is a process by which environmental considerations are required to be fully integrated into the preparation of plans and programmes which act as frameworks for development consent, prior to their final adoption, with public consultation as part of that process.

Following a tendering process, my Department appointed SEA experts in December 2017 to assist in this regard. It is expected that a public consultation on the revised draft Guidelines, together with the comprehensive environmental report, will be undertaken during the second quarter of this year, with the aim of issuing the finalised Guidelines, following detailed analysis and consideration of the submissions and views received during the consultation phase, in Q3 2018.

When finalised, the revised Guidelines will be issued under Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. Planning authorities, and, where applicable, An Bord Pleanála must have regard to guidelines issued under Section 28 in the performance of their functions generally under the Planning Acts. In the meantime, the current 2006 Wind Energy Development Guidelines remain in force.

Housing Assistance Payment

276. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to provide a solution for homeless charities in relation to HAP (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14329/18]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Rent Supplement is a means-tested payment for certain people living in private rented accommodation who cannot provide for the cost of their accommodation from their own resources.

The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) is a form of social housing support for people who have a long-term housing need. It is available in all local authority areas and its introduction now ensures that all social housing supports can be accessed through the local authorities, allowing tenants to take up full-time employment and keep their housing support, subject to adjustment of their differential rent.

HAP is paid directly to landlords and may be payable to Approved Housing Bodies who can demonstrate that they are entitled to be landlords of a particular property. This might include long term lease arrangements where the AHB is entitled to be a landlord in a property they have leased.

HAP would only be payable following submission of a valid application completed by the tenant and landlord. AHBs would also be required to confirm that there has been no other State funding provided in respect of the particular property to ensure no double funding arises.

My Department has contacted the charity referred to for specific details and will liaise with the Local Authority and charity to identify potential mechanisms to facilitate the best outcome for the social housing tenants involved.

Departmental Staff Data

277. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the percentage of persons employed in his Department that have a disability, expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14442/18]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 sets out the legal obligation of the public sector to meet a target of 3% of employees with disabilities. This Act also provides for a statutory annual report on the employment of people with disabilities in the public sector.

The latest available figures relate to 2016 when 4.7% of staff (32 staff) in my Department declared themselves as having a disability as defined under the Disability Act 2005. The Department only records data on those staff members who have self-declared their disability.

Nuclear Plants

278. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the State has received communication from the UK Government in respect of the UK National Policy Statement for nuclear power (details supplied); if so, when the communication was received; the nature of the communication; if a copy of same will be made available; the way in which this communication was handled by his Department; the response that issued in respect of same; if this response will be made available; if no response issued, the reason therefor; if Ireland is being formally consulted by the UK on this matter; if not, if the State is seeking to assert such consultation rights; if not, the reason therefor; the proposals being made to provide for public consultation on this matter by the Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14467/18]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): My Department received correspondence from the UK authorities on 7 December 2017, informing it of the carrying out of a public consultation on the process and criteria for designating potentially suitable sites in a new National Policy Statement for nuclear power projects with over 1GW of single reactor capacity for the period 2026-2035, and stating that the Department could make a submission in the matter by 15 March 2018.

As preparatory work for a policy statement for future nuclear power projects does not engage the requirements of the UN Convention on assessing environmental impacts in a transboundary context (the Espoo Convention) or the corresponding requirements of the EU Directives relating to environmental impact assessment and strategic environmental assessment (SEA), I have no function in relation to the public consultation concerned. My Department, therefore, forwarded the UK correspondence to both the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, which has responsibility at national level for nuclear policy and radiological protection, and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, for appropriate attention.

Arising from separate correspondence from the UK public authorities in relation to public consultation on a different draft national policy statement, my Department is awaiting a response to its request for confirmation of the UK authorities' position on the likely significant effects of the preparatory work for a policy statement for future nuclear power projects on the environment of other States and the consequential issue of whether transboundary consultation under the SEA Directive is required.

Regional Development Initiatives

279. **Deputy Tony McLoughlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the announcement of regional projects within the Ireland 2040 plan, specifically those relating to counties Sligo and Leitrim; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14474/18]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Project Ireland 2040, which was launched by the Government last month, sets out the long-term planning and investment strategy for the country and contains a wide range of major investment projects and commitments within the 10-year National Development Plan.

In addition, the 20-year National Planning Framework outlines the broader policy principles and priorities to plan in a more strategic and coordinated manner for an estimated 1 million increase in our population, with the requirement for over 600,000 new jobs and over 550,000 new homes by 2040, and its principles are underpinned by the capital investment priorities within the NDP.

My Department has secured substantial capital funding resources under the 10-year NDP in the areas of housing, water services infrastructure and other key delivery areas, and will be working closely with the local government sector and our other agencies to further develop and implement the actions and projects identified.

Details of sectoral investment and priority projects are already listed throughout both documents, which are available on the dedicated webpage, www.gov.ie/en/project-ireland-2040.

Programme and project identification to enable overall implementation of Project Ireland 2040 will also be progressed at national, regional and local levels, through specific measures contained in Project Ireland 2040, allied to forthcoming Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSESSs) being developed by the three Regional Assemblies by the end of this year. These

Strategies will subsequently be further elaborated upon at local authority city and county development plan levels.

Accordingly, given the long-term outlook of Project Ireland 2040, the planning and investment process at regional level will necessarily be a rolling one and will be subject to both regular updates through the Project Ireland 2040 website and appropriate oversight arrangements currently being progressed by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and my Department.

Question Heading

280. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the membership of the working group on the Hill of Tara. [14299/18]

281. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht when the working group on the Hill of Tara will report on its work. [14300/18]

282. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will meet local residents in relation to the Hill of Tara. [14301/18]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 280 to 282, inclusive, together.

My Department is leading a working group of relevant stakeholders, including the Office of Public Works (OPW), Meath County Council, the Heritage Council and the Discovery Programme, to develop a conservation management plan for the state-owned lands at the Hill of Tara. This working group met as recently as 5 March 2018 when a provisional work programme was agreed which anticipates a draft plan being ready for circulation in mid-summer.

The new plan will focus on conservation and will inform a list of priority conservation and site management actions and measures. Focusing on the lands that are in the ownership of the State, it will inform future interventions on the site, aided by the ongoing monitoring of visitor numbers by the OPW. The Plan will not, nor is it intended to, address land use and planning issues in the wider environs of Tara. It will nevertheless help to inform the future planning and development of the area.

Public consultation will be a key component in developing the new plan. As a first step in that process, I have just announced details of an online questionnaire that can be accessed on the Heritage Council's website. This gives everyone with an interest in the Hill of Tara an immediate opportunity to make their views on its future known. I would urge people to participate, in particular local residents, as the more comments received the more representative the process will be. The consultation phase is intended to be an open and effective way for members of the public to engage in a constructive dialogue on Tara. The feedback received will be carefully assessed and analysed and will feed into the text of the Plan. As the draft plan evolves, there will be further consultation with all the stakeholders concerned, including with local residents.

While the development of a plan of this nature is challenging, given the complexity and size of the site and the interests of varied stakeholders, I am confident that it can be completed and adopted in the coming 12 months.

When finalised, it will form a solid framework in which all of the ongoing site management issues referred to by the Deputy will be addressed. It will help to inform conservation priorities on the site and guide future investment decisions in visitor and interpretation facilities that are

compatible with its international standing and significance.

Departmental Staff Data

283. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the percentage of persons employed in her Department who have a disability, expressed in whole-time equivalent terms and in head count terms; and the way in which the number of persons with disabilities employed compares with national targets. [14435/18]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I am advised that my Department complies with the “Code of practice for the employment of people with disability in the Civil Service” and that 20 staff, 3.15% of my Department’s employees, have a disability according to the definition provided in the Disability Act, 2005. This figure exceeds the current target of 3% set out in the legislation and equates to 14 whole time equivalent staff.