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 12, inclusive, answered orally.

Questions Nos. 13 to 17, inclusive, resubmitted.

Climate Change Adaptation Plans

18. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on progress on the Climate Action Plan 2019; and the role of his Department in the delivery of same. [45465/19]

The Taoiseach: The *Climate Action Plan 2019: To Tackle Climate Breakdown* was published on 17 June 2019. The Plan contains 183 actions, broken down into 619 individual steps, which Ireland needs to implement to meet our EU 2030 targets and achieve our longer-term low carbon transition objective.

Delivering such an integrated set of actions requires a deep level of collaboration across Government.

The Plan outlines significant new governance structures to ensure that climate policy is implemented. This includes the establishment of the Climate Action Delivery Board within my Department to hold each department and public body accountable for the delivery of actions set out in the Plan.

A Climate Action Unit has also been set up in my Department to support the Climate Action Delivery Board and the Cabinet Committee on the Environment to monitor and drive implementation of the Plan.

There is a strong focus on accountability in the Climate Action Plan including a commitment to publish progress reports quarterly, the first of which was launched on 31 October.

The First Progress Report shows that 85% of the actions due for delivery in Quarter 2 and 3 of this year have been delivered, incorporating 149 measures across sectors. Accountability for the delivery of the remaining 27 delayed items will be pursued in forthcoming quarters.

Key milestones delivered to date under the Climate Action Plan include:

Questions Nos. 19 to 27, inclusive, resubmitted.

Questions Nos. 28 to 38, inclusive, answered orally.

VAT Rate Application

39. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the review into the application of VAT onto food supplements; his plans regarding implementing the recommendations of the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46677/19]

58. **Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin** asked the Minister for Finance the status of VAT on food supplements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46566/19]

59. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Finance the position regarding the VAT treatment by the Revenue Commissioners of health foods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46049/19]

60. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to apply a 23% VAT rate to food supplements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46685/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 39 and 58 to 60, inclusive, together.

Food supplement products are subject to the standard rate of VAT (23%). Shortly after the introduction of VAT, Revenue allowed the zero rate to be applied to certain food supplement products (vitamins, minerals and fish oils). This concessionary approach expanded as the market developed over the years and resulted in the zero rating by Revenue of further similar products, including products other than vitamins, minerals and fish oils.

Following complaints from the Irish Health Trade Association (IHTA), Revenue conducted a comprehensive review of the VAT treatment of food supplement products. Based on an expert report and its own legal analysis, Revenue concluded that the status quo was no longer sustainable and issued new guidance in December 2018 which removed the concessionary zero rating of various food supplement products with effect from 1 March 2019.

Following representation from Deputies and from the industry, I wrote to Revenue outlining my plans to examine the policy and legislative options for the taxation of food supplement products in the context of Finance Bill 2019. Revenue responded by delaying the withdrawal of its concessionary zero rating of the food supplement products concerned. This allowed time for my Department to carry out a public consultation on the taxation of food supplement products.

Based on this consultation, I introduced a provision in this year's Finance Bill applying the reduced rate of VAT (13.5%) to food supplements from 1 January 2020. In the absence of this provision the standard VAT rate of 23% would apply to food supplements, including those that had been concessionally zero rated previously.

It is important to clarify that certain products will not be impacted by the legislative change. Foods for specific groups such as infant and follow-on formulae and infant foods, foods for special medical purposes and specially formulated foods will continue to be zero rated as they are well established and defined categories of food. Fortified foods, such as yoghurts and cereals fortified with vitamins and minerals, will also continue to be zero rated as they are food.

Folic acid, vitamin and mineral products which are licenced or authorised as medicines by the Health Products Regulatory Authority will continue to be zero rated under a different VAT provision for human oral medicines.

Insurance Industry Regulation

40. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will engage with the Cen-

tral Bank over the use of dual pricing by the insurance industry; and the measures he will take to ensure semi-State companies, such as An Post, do not practice dual pricing. [46690/19]

75. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Finance if her attention has been drawn to the practice and prevalence of dual pricing in the insurance market and its effect on consumers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41218/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 40 and 75 together.

At the outset, the Deputies should note that the Minister for Finance is responsible for the development of the legal framework governing financial regulation. Neither I, the Minister for Finance, nor the Central Bank of Ireland can interfere in the provision or pricing of insurance products as these matters are of a commercial nature and are determined by insurance companies based on an assessment of the risks they are willing to accept. However, as the Deputy is aware, in my role as the Minister of State for Financial Services and Insurance, I have raised the issue of dual pricing with the Central Bank at a recent meeting and sought their views. In response, the Central Bank has confirmed that they will undertake a review of price optimisation, which includes the practice of dual pricing, as this has been identified as a potential consumer risk by the Central Bank in its sectoral risk assessment of the insurance sector.

I understand that the first step of this review will be a comprehensive data gathering and analysis exercise to determine the scale and prevalence of price optimisation across the insurance sector and its precise effects on consumer groups. I also understand that the Central Bank intends to engage with key stakeholders, most notably the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, on the terms of reference of this review and on the nature and scope of any potential remedies. It is the Central Bank's intention that the data gathering exercise will inform its views on any legal, supervisory and policy measures that may be required – but any such interventions will need to be carefully considered.

I would agree with the Central Bank's assessment of the complexity of this issue and that we will need to carefully consider any potential remedies, as to do so may improve matters for certain consumers while at the same time impact negatively on other consumers. I do not think we are at the point of making conclusions on this issue and I will await the views of the Bank in this regard.

Finally, the Deputies should note that the insurance business linked to An Post operates as a wholly owned subsidiary of An Post and is regulated by the Central Bank of Ireland. Like other insurance companies, I cannot direct or interfere in the commercial decisions that it makes in relation to pricing or coverage.

Public Liability Insurance

41. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance the measures he is taking to tackle the cost of public liability insurance for businesses; the measures he will introduce to deal with false or exaggerated claims against businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46676/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): While neither I, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, can interfere in the provision or pricing of insurance products, the Government, through the work of the Cost of Insurance Working Group (CIWG) Reports, has identified the key problems that need to be addressed if we are to significantly reduce the cost of business insurance.

In this regard, the work of the Personal Injuries Commission (PIC) has been of critical importance. It found that the level of awards here for soft tissue injuries were 4.4 times higher than England and Wales. Such a discrepancy is in my view unjustified and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. It recommended that the Judiciary should be made responsible for recalibrating award levels.

With the passage of the Judicial Council Act, I am confident that the Judiciary will prioritise this recalibration exercise and that they will take account of the PIC's findings. I would also note that the Law Reform Commission is currently undertaking a detailed analysis as to whether we could establish constitutionally sound legislation to cap or limit the amount of damages a court may award. It is due to report back next year.

In respect of measures to address false or exaggerated claims, the *Personal Injuries Assessment Board (Amendment) Act 2019,* strengthens the powers of PIAB around compliance with its procedures, and amendments to Sections 8 and 14 of the *Civil Liability and Courts Act 2004*, make it easier for businesses and insurers to challenge cases where fraud or exaggeration is suspected. There have also been various reforms of how fraud is reported to and dealt with by An Garda Síochána, including increased co-ordination with the insurance industry. In addition, the recent decision by the Garda Commissioner to develop a divisional focus on insurance fraud which will be guided by the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau, which will also train Gardaí all over the country on investigating insurance fraud is an important step forward.

In conclusion, I would like to assure the Deputy that important reforms are taking place and that I am confident that if the level of awards are reduced then the insurance cost and coverage issues that are being experienced by businesses should recede.

Infrastructure and Capital Investment Programme

42. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Finance the details of each State infrastructure project that is in development or is due for completion in 2019 in which it is in excess of the budget assigned to the project for its current stage to date. [39522/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I can confirm that the Department of Finance has no state infrastructure projects that are in development or are due for completion in 2019.

Tax Reliefs Availability

43. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the way in which he can justify continuing very significant tax breaks to the very highest earners through schemes such as the special assignee relief programme, SARP, and the key employee engagement programme, KEEP, in view of the significant and growing wealth and income inequalities in society; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46678/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Special Assignee Relief Programme (SARP) is designed to help reduce the cost to employers of assigning skilled individuals in their companies from abroad to take up positions in the Irish-based operations of their employer or an associated company, thereby facilitating the creation of jobs and the development and expansion of businesses in Ireland.

Earlier this year, I commissioned an independent review of the scheme which was carried out by Indecon Economic Consultants. In their report, Indecon confirmed to me the strong policy rationale for the continued relevance of SARP to the Irish economy.

Ireland's enterprise policy is based on export-led growth; Foreign Direct Investment has been and continues to be an integral part of Ireland's economic development. The existence of an incentive like SARP is an acknowledgement that we are competing on a global basis for highly skilled and mobile executives. The competition for this talent is intense, particularly for the types of skills required to facilitate the development and expansion of businesses in Ireland.

The existence of similar (and indeed more attractive) special assignee type tax reliefs in a number of competitor jurisdictions creates a market failure that would not be addressed if not for the continued existence of SARP.

The benefits of SARP, aside from enhancing our international competitiveness, are detailed clearly in the Indecon report and they include:

- Increased employment and retention of staff within SARP companies;

- Associated additional investment in the economy of the order of €25 million;

- Additional Corporation Tax receipts;

- Additional PAYE receipts; and

- R&D spillover activity.

The Indecon report also highlights the following data regarding companies that availed of SARP for the year 2017:

- they paid over €2.5 billion in corporation tax;

- they employed over 155,00 individuals; and,

- they paid over €1.9 billion in PAYE taxes.

On the basis of these findings, and in the interests of providing certainty for potential beneficiary firms, I am providing for the extension of SARP in Finance Bill 2019 until 31 December 2022 from the current sunset date of 31 December 2020.

More generally in relation to SARP, there is of course a balance to be struck between the principle of horizontal equity within the tax system and the need to compete internationally for highly skilled and mobile personnel. In this regard, and in order to seek to ensure that the appropriate balance is maintained, the issue is kept under regular review through detailed examinations of the type just recently carried out by Indecon.

The 'Key Employee Engagement Programme' (KEEP) was introduced in Budget 2018 and has the objective of supporting SMEs in Ireland in competing with larger enterprises to recruit and retain key employees. Smaller and/or younger companies with growth potential may not have the cash resources available to offer comparable salary packages to those offered by large, established businesses. However, where the employee believes in the growth potential of the firm, and by extension the potential for the company shares to increase in value, remuneration in the form of share options may improve the attractiveness of the SME employment offer.

International research has shown that Employee Financial Participation can be effective in fostering partnership and increasing competitiveness and in helping companies to attract and retain staff in a competitive international labour market. Improved competiveness of companies supports the creation and maintenance of employment, and this in turn supports economic growth which benefits the economy as a whole.

Finance Bill 2019 provides for a number of enhancements to the KEEP scheme which are primarily aimed at improving the accessibility of the scheme to SMEs, and allowing more flexible and family-friendly working arrangements to qualify under the scheme.

Motor Insurance

44. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Finance when the car insurance premium levy will be terminated. [46265/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): At the outset, you should note that there are no plans to discontinue the existing insurance premium levies and contributions which are on both motor and non-motor insurance premiums. It is important to understand that these payments serve different purposes and some have been in place for some time: The levies and contributions are as follows:

The Motor Insurers Insolvency Compensation Fund (MIIC Fund) commenced on 1 December 2018 and was introduced by the Insurance Amendment Act 2018. This is a contribution equivalent to 2% of gross motor premiums and is being provided by motor insurers in order to finance the gap between what the ICF used pay to third party claimants (65%) and the amount which the Motor Insurers Bureau of Ireland pays in respect of victims of uninsured and untraceable drivers (100% of claim as general rule). This is not considered a levy as the decision rests with the insurance companies as to how they finance this contribution, i.e. either through absorbing it or passing it onto consumers.

The contribution rate is subject to an annual review by the Minister and may be varied between 0 and 3% depending on factors such as the amount held in the MIIC Fund and the likelihood of a call on that Fund. In a steady state, this contribution is likely to be required for a period of 8 to 9 years.

The second contribution that impacts motor premium is the Insurance Compensation Fund (ICF) levy. This levy was in place from 1984 to 1992 and was reintroduced in January 2012. It currently applies at a rate of 2% of all gross premium income and its purpose is to repay the Exchequer for funding the administration of Quinn Insurance. As there is still a significant amount owing to the State, the levy is likely to be applied for another 10 years or so. The balance on the loan provided by the Minister to the ICF was €800.6m at 31 December 2018.

Finally, the Deputy may wish to note that there is a stamp duty on non-life insurance premiums that was introduced in 1982. The rate of stamp duty when introduced was 1%, rising to 2% in 1993 and further increased to 3% in the 2009 Supplementary Budget. This stamp duty on non-life insurance premiums forms a part of general stamp duty receipts and is paid into the Central Fund along with other tax receipts.

Drugs Seizures

45. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Finance the number of packets and parcels containing illegal drugs detected by the Revenue Commissioners going through the postal service in each of the years 2016 to 2018 and to date 2019; the value of the seizures; if prosecutions resulted from the detections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46585/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the number of seizures of drugs going through the postal services in the years 2016 – 2018 and to-date in 2019 (*31/10/19), the volume and the value of those seizures is as set out in the following table:

Year	Number of seizures	Volume (kg)	Value (€)
2016	884	131.38	1,688,323.53
2017	933	275.90	4,190,281.76
2018	1,149	282.15	2,585,476.12
2019 (to 31 October)	2,211	543.89	2,958,671.46
Total	5,177	1,233.32	11,422,752.87

I am assured by Revenue that combating the smuggling/importation of controlled drugs into this jurisdiction is, and will continue to be, a priority. Revenue's work against drugs crime is extensive and multifaceted and is kept under constant review to ensure that it makes the most effective contribution possible to dealing with this societal problem, in the overall framework of the Government's National Drugs Strategy 2017-2025.

I am advised also that prosecutions for offences in relation to controlled drugs are, by agreement, between Revenue and An Garda Síochána, undertaken by An Garda Síochána.

Consumer Protection

46. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the poor level of consumer protection for mortgagors here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46548/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The consumer protection regulatory framework includes a number of very important measures to protect consumers who are taking out a mortgage, and it seeks to ensure that lenders are transparent and fair in all their dealings with borrowers and that borrowers are protected from the beginning to the end of the mortgage life cycle.

This financial services framework includes protections under the Central Bank Consumer Protection Code 2012, the European Union (Consumer Mortgage Credit Agreements) Regulations 2016, the Consumer Credit Act 1995 and the Central Bank Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears.

The Consumer Protection Code provides that a regulated entity must act honestly, fairly and professionally in the best interests of its customers and the integrity of the market, and must make full disclosure of all relevant material information in a way that seeks to inform the customer. It also imposes 'Knowing the Consumer and Suitability' requirements on lenders. Lenders are required to assess affordability of credit and the suitability of a product or service based on the individual circumstances of each borrower.

The European Union (Consumer Mortgage Credit Agreements) Regulations 2016 transposed the provisions of the Mortgage Credit Directive into Irish law and provide a framework within which all lenders that provide mortgage credit to consumers in the European Union must operate. The Regulations set out further requirements to protect mortgage borrowers, including requirements in respect of provision of standardised information to consumers and the requirement to carry out creditworthiness assessments. Furthermore, the Regulations provide that a lender is not to provide residential mortgage credit to a consumer unless the assessment indicates that the borrower is likely to be in a position to meet his/her obligations in the manner required by the credit agreement.

The Consumer Credit Act 1995 also includes requirements for housing loans, including buy-to-let mortgages. Under the Act, there are provisions in relation to insurance and duties on lenders to supply documentation and information on a mortgage loan.

The Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears applies to all regulated mortgage lenders and credit servicing firms operating in the State when dealing with borrowers facing or in mortgage arrears on their primary residence. It provides a strong consumer protection framework to ensure that borrowers struggling to keep up mortgage repayments are treated in a fair and transparent way by their lender and that long term resolution is sought by lenders with each of their borrowers.

Overall, therefore, there is a robust consumer protection regulatory framework governing the provision and operation of mortgage agreements.

Property Tax

47. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether the local property tax is likely to become increasingly problematic and regressive due to its link to the property market conditions. [46681/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The basis for calculation of the Local Property Tax (LPT) was examined comprehensively in the 2012 report of the Inter-departmental Group on the Design of a LPT. The report advocated the use of market value of residential properties as the basis of assessment and this recommendation was accepted by the Government. The Design Group considered that under a market value approach applied to housing, the market value of a residential property would be related to the characteristics of the building itself, the site on which it was located and the features and amenities of the neighbourhood. There would be a relationship between the market value of a house and benefits to the owners in terms of enjoyment of the amenity value of the property. The charging structure for LPT is progressive. The basic rate of 0.18 percent applies up to property values of €1 million with a higher rate of 0.25 percent applying on the portion of value above the €1 million threshold.

The Inter-departmental LPT Review Group which reported to me earlier this year was conscious of the potential effects of significant changes in LPT liability on individual households and how progressive these might be. Considerable work was done by the Review Group on the estimated impact of changes in property values including a Distributional Impact Analysis. The Distributional Impact Analysis using the ESRI SWITCH Model (Simulating Welfare and Income Tax Changes) tax and benefit micro-simulation model, was used to compare the impact which the proposed reform scenarios would have on household incomes relative to an indicative benchmark position where the property value increases but there is no change in the LPT rate charged. The results indicate that all scenarios were progressive rather than regressive to varying degrees (see pages 74-77 of LPT review report https://assets.gov.ie/7465/91ccbd3ddc97461898211710e2d7ec55.pdf).

I referred the Review Report to the Budgetary Oversight Committee which has issued its Scrutiny Report on the matter. With this input, I will now reflect on how best to proceed and give effect to changes to the LPT based on the policy objectives I consider should underpin the tax. These are

- Protection of the overall yield

- Relative stability in household liabilities with modest and affordable increases should they arise

- Integration of new properties into the LPT base

- Maintenance of the tax base with a small number of exemptions, and

- Upholding the progressivity of the tax.

Question No. 48 answered with Question No. 35.

Tax Appeals Commission

49. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the rise in the amount of taxation assessments in dispute at the Tax Appeals Commission. [45807/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Tax Appeals Commission (TAC) was established on 21st March 2016, taking over from the former Office of the Appeal Commissioners. Since its establishment, staffing at the Commission has grown from two Commissioners and four administrative staff, to five Commissioners and twenty three administrative staff at various grades as of end-October 2019.

I am advised by the TAC that there were 3,401 open appeals on 31 October, 2019. I am also advised that it is difficult for the TAC to provide a fully accurate quantum figure due to the nature of tax disputes; however at 31 October, 2019 the TAC recorded an estimated quantum of approximately €3.7 billion. Of this amount, €2.5 billion is comprised in 10 appeals, five of which were received by the TAC in the last week of December 2018.

Some appeals cannot be progressed when the Commission has to await the outcome of court proceedings. For example, a stay may have been placed on the progression of the appeals by the TAC by Order of the High Court, Court of Appeal or Supreme Court. Of the 10 highest-value appeals before the TAC, two appeals with a combined value of €1.67 billion are currently stayed by Court Order and cannot be progressed by the TAC until the stays are lifted.

Factors which have contributed to the development of a backlog of appeals include:

1. the Commission inheriting a substantial number of legacy appeals on establishment and,

2. the process for appeals changed on establishment, resulting in appeals now being notified to the Commission in the first instance, rather than to Revenue.

Due to the growing backlog and requests for extra resources, I commissioned an independent review of the workload and operations of the Commission in 2018.

The review was conducted by Niamh O'Donoghue, a former Secretary General of the Department of Social Protection, and examined the governance structures, workload and operations of the Commission. The resulting report was published on Budget Day last year and is available at the following link - www.budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2019/Documents/18.%20Independent%20review%20of%20the%20workload%20and%20operations%20of%20the%20Tax%20Appeals%20Commission.pdf.

I expressed my full support for the recommendations. Work on implementation is ongoing both in the Department and the TAC. The following actions have taken place to date:

- A near doubling of the Commission's budget for 2019 to accommodate the recommendations of the review. This budget has been maintained for 2020.

- The authorisation of the appointment of three additional Temporary Appeal Commissioners, two of whom took up their appointments in September with a further Commissioner to commence in January.

- The recommended additional administrative and technical posts were sanctioned and recruitment for these posts is nearing completion.

- Enhanced regular contact between the Commission and the Department on governance matters and corporate supports is taking place, and

- An administration working group meets regularly to address any issues arising between the Commissioners and Revenue in relation to the administration of appeals.

The Finance (Tax Appeals and Prospectus Regulation) Bill 2019 is currently progressing in the Dáil. This Bill will enable progression of another key recommendation of the review, the appointment of a Chairperson.

While a backlog of appeals remains, the additional budget and resources should allow the TAC to make progress in addressing the current backlog. I expect the overall number of appeals on hand, and consequently the quantum of tax under appeal, to begin to decrease steadily over time.

Question No. 50 answered with Question No. 33.

Sovereign Debt

51. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Finance if the NTMA will be able to refinance debt in 2020 as planned in the event of a no-deal Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39613/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The NTMA's bond funding programme for the year is now complete. Over the course of 2019 a total of €14.4bn of benchmark bond funding was raised. This funding was completed at a weighted average yield of 0.9% and a weighted average maturity of over 16 years. A further €0.4bn was issued by way of a new inflation linked bond maturing in 2045 and a 100-year note maturing in 2119. This brings total long-term funding for the year to close to €15bn.

I am informed by the National Treasury Management Agency that it is confident its prudent approach to the Exchequer's funding requirement means it can meet the Exchequer's funding needs, irrespective of the risks – such as a no-deal Brexit – that might emerge.

The pre-funding strategy of the NTMA in recent years means the Exchequer is in a strong position ahead of the upcoming debt maturities. The NTMA expects to hold cash balances of approximately €15bn at year-end. This will leave it well positioned to meet medium/long-term debt maturities totalling €19bn in 2020.

There are two benchmark bond maturities in 2020, one in April and the second in October. These bonds have outstanding balances currently of €10.6bn and €6.5bn respectively. In addition there are four £0.4bn tranches of the UK Bilateral loan maturing in 2020. So in total there is approximately €19bn of maturing medium/long-term debt next year.

In terms of contingency planning for Brexit, the NTMA constantly monitors developments in the bond markets. Ireland's debt dynamics continue to improve and debt servicing costs are declining. The Exchequer's funding position is strong due to the activities of the NTMA in recent years, and refinancing needs for next year have been significantly reduced through active debt management. The NTMA has completed its bond funding programme for the year and expects the Exchequer to have approximately €15bn in cash balances leaving it well positioned heading into 2020.

Legal Costs

52. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of legal fees, and the companies and firms to which the fees have been paid, disaggregated by amount of fees paid to each firm, in the appeal case regarding the 2016 ruling by the Competition Commissioner on illegal state aid in respect of a company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46687/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Ireland has never accepted the Commission's analysis in the Apple State aid Decision and is challenging the Commission's decision before the European Courts.

An application to annul the Commission Decision was lodged with the General Court of the European Union. The case was granted priority status and the confidential written proceedings have taken place in private over the last number of years. The oral hearing took place in the General Court of the European Union on 17th and 18th September. The timing of the judgement is entirely at the discretion of the Court. However it will most likely be several years before the case is ultimately concluded.

Ireland fully respects the judicial process and as can be expected, throughout this process Ireland has robustly defended its position. An overview of the main arguments made has been placed on my Department's website. As this is the subject of ongoing legal proceedings I cannot comment further on the State's legal case.

Notwithstanding our position that there was no State aid granted, the Irish authorities have engaged fully with the European Commission throughout the State aid investigation, including in relation to the legal obligation to recover the alleged aid. This involved the complex process of the establishment of an escrow fund in compliance with all relevant Irish constitutional and European Union law requirements.

Over the past seven years approximately €7.5 million (including VAT) has been paid for external services relating to the case, of which approximately €3.9 million relates to the recovery process. This includes all legal costs, consultancy fees and other associated costs. These fees have been paid by the Department of Finance, Revenue Commissioners, NTMA, Central Bank of Ireland, Attorney General's Office and Chief State Solicitor's Office.

The cost of legal fees is lower than the total cost as other fees are not included, such as in relation to translation services.

There are five companies covered by your question regarding the legal fees and the companies and firms to which the fees have been paid, and the totals paid to date to each of these, inclusive of VAT, are approximately as follows:

- William Fry: €3.2 million

- McCann Fitzgerald: €523,000

- PWC: €611,000

- Baker McKenzie: €148,000

- Hogan Lovells: €3,900

For completeness, the total paid to external Counsel engaged is approximately €2.8 million. As the Deputy will be aware, while I previously provided detail of payments made to individual Counsel, I am not now in a position to provide such details arising from legal advices provided to my Department.

I would also say that it is not possible to determine future costs of the case. However, as it is an important matter for the State, the case will continue to be resourced as appropriate.

Question No. 53 answered with Question No. 38.

Consumer Protection

54. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to a report by an organisation (details supplied) which states that moving to a cashless society mainly benefits banks and card issuers and will lead to financial and social exclusion; his plans to ensure consumers have a continued non-discriminatory right to use cash; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46553/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): My officials were aware of the publication of this report. This report presents the case that consumers should have a right to access and use cash alongside electronic and innovative means of payment, and analyses the possible consequences for consumers of the total disappearance of cash.

The report makes a number of recommendations concerning the acceptance of cash by physical traders, the availability of ATMs within Member States, charges imposed on consumers when using ATMs, and the promotion of cashback in shops.

Earlier this year I launched a study benchmarking Ireland's payment industry, which was commissioned by my Department in 2018. This study found that, notwithstanding a significant increase in the take-up of electronic payments, cash remains a vital part of the Irish payment system. The study also concluded that a fully cashless society would not be an appropriate objective.

In relation to the specific recommendations set out in the report referred to by the Deputy, the quarterly Payments Monitor published by the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland shows that while the volume of ATM withdrawals has remained stable in recent years, the value of cash withdrawn from ATMs has recently been growing and is up 5.7 per cent year-on-year in the first quarter of 2019.

The report finds that cashback in shops is currently only common practice in 11 EU Member States and recommends that it be promoted. Ireland, of course, is one of those 11 Member States, with cashback a long and well-established practice in this jurisdiction.

There certainly has been a notable increase in the use of electronic payments, particularly in contactless payments, over the last decade. In recent years there is also evidence of greater financial inclusion. The CSO Household Budget Survey Data shows that the proportion of households with access to a current account in Ireland has increased significantly. The EU Payment Account Directive, transposed in 2016, makes it easier for consumers who do not have a payment account to open one, whatever their personal financial situation.

My officials will continue to monitor developments in the area of payments.

NAMA Operations

55. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the role he envisages for NAMA in the period ahead; when he expects the agency to wind up; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46672/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): NAMA held remaining debtor loans with a fair value of €1.73 billion at the end of Q2 2019. Much of NAMA's remaining portfolio is secured by low-value, granular assets and realisation of these assets continues to require patient and extensive work on the part of NAMA.

In July 2019, I published the second Section 227 Review under the NAMA Act 2009 where NAMA estimated that it expects to hold a residual loan book with a carrying value of c.€300 million by the end of 2021. Much of these residual assets are either subject to ongoing legal proceedings or are secured by residential development sites that have the potential to deliver a significant value uplift beyond 2021.

On foot of the Section 227 review I have recommended that NAMA be allowed additional time to work through this residual loan portfolio to enable the Agency to maximise the value of this residual portfolio in the interest of the taxpayer and best fulfil its commercial obligations under Section 10 of the NAMA Act. To this end I have requested that NAMA submit a detailed wind-down plan for its ultimate dissolution to the Minister for Finance by the end of 2021, and its operations shall not continue past end-December 2025 at the latest.

It is not expected that NAMA's extension will impact upon the timeline for the transfer of its expected €4bn surplus in the coming years.

Brexit Documents

56. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has carried out an economic impact assessment of the draft withdrawal agreement agreed in October 2019 between the European Union and the UK Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46673/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Budget 2020, including the macroeconomic outlook which underpins it, was based on the prudent assumption that the UK would leave the EU on 31 October without an agreement. The macroeconomic outlook is set out in the *Economic and Fiscal Outlook* published with Budget 2020. This included, at Box 4, an assessment of the macroeconomic outlook that would apply in the event of an agreed exit by the UK at end October.

The Withdrawal Agreement endorsed by the European Council, will now require ratification by the European Parliament and the UK Parliament. Pending ratification of the deal, it is not possible to say if the outlook will be different to that set out in Budget 2020.

If the Withdrawal Agreement is ratified, the UK will enter a transition period until at least the end of 2020. In this situation the outlook would be broadly similar to that set out in Table 4 (Box 4) in the *Economic and Fiscal Outlook 2020*. This shows that, in the event of an agreed exit, GDP growth is forecast to be 3.1 per cent in 2020, with employment growth projected at 1.7 per cent next year and the unemployment rate expected to be 5.1 per cent.

The revised Political Declaration envisages an ambitious trading relationship for goods on the basis of a Free Trade Agreement, but until there is greater clarity on the post-transition relationship there is likely to be continued uncertainty, particularly with respect to private sector investment. My Department has been in contact with the ESRI on the economic impact of the revised Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration on the future relationship. I am satisfied that the existing analysis in the joint research by the Department of Finance and ESRI, published in March this year, broadly captures the range of possible future relationships. The analysis included a free trade agreement (of which there could be many forms), and a trading relationship under World Trade Organisation (WTO) frameworks. The impacts of these were modelled and estimated in the joint research which was published in March this year.

Under these scenarios, over the medium-term (i.e. 5 years) the level of GDP would be of the order of between 1.9 and 3.3 per cent lower, respectively, compared to a situation where the UK remains in the EU. The negative impacts will be most severely felt in those sectors with strong export ties to the UK market – such as the agri-food, manufacturing and tourism sectors and also SMEs generally – along with their suppliers. The impact will be particularly noticeable outside the main cities.

My Department will continue to monitor developments with respect to the ratification of the Withdrawal Agreement, and the future relationship with the UK, and will update the macroeconomic and fiscal projections to take account of any developments in the Spring of next year at the latest.

Credit Unions

57. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the way in which the industrial funding levy on credit unions will be applied in the coming years; if he will consider exempting credit unions from the levy in view of their social impact; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46689/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Since 2004, the amount of the levy payable by a credit union has been capped at a rate of 0.01 per cent of its total assets as at 30 September of the previous year. The balance of regulatory costs has been funded by the Central Bank in accordance with the provisions of the Central Bank Act, 1942 (as amended). The cost of regulating the credit union sector has increased over recent years with the emergence of the necessity to increase the intensity of supervision of this sector. Given that total assets of the sector have remained relatively static, this has resulted in a significant reduction in the proportion of the total cost of funding provided by the sector as a whole. In 2018, the credit union sector contributed €1.7 million (circa 9 per cent of the total costs incurred in regulating the sector).

Earlier this year, I approved the Central Bank request to recover 50 per cent of credit union costs on a phased basis, starting with a 20 per cent recovery rate for the 2019 levy, which will be levied on an arrears basis in 2020, moving to 35 per cent in 2020 (levied in 2021) and to 50 per cent in 2021 (levied in 2022). In response to the Central Bank's request I also recommended that credit union contributions should not increase beyond the 50 per cent target until:

a. The levy trajectory has reached the planned 50 per cent rate, at which time the impact on the viability of the sector will be better understood; and

b. A public consultation regarding increasing the levy rate for credit unions beyond 50 per cent is undertaken, which would include a regulatory impact assessment of such a change on the sector.

In contrast to this, recovery rates in 2018 for all other industry categories ranged from 65 per cent to 100 per cent, and the Central Bank intends to increase all to 100 per cent funding over the next number of years.

Exemptions from levies result in a burden on the tax payer through state subvention. Given that all other financial services sectors are at, or moving towards, 100% recovery, the move towards 50 per cent in respect of credit unions, with further increases at that time being subject to consultation and Ministerial approval, is measured and takes account of the role that credit unions play in Irish society.

The Deputy might also wish to note that the Department of Finance, in collaboration with the Central Bank, held a public consultation on potential changes to the Credit Institutions Resolution Fund Levy. Following this review I announced on 1 October 2019 a reduction in the levy rate which will result in a reduction of €4 million per annum from €9 million in 2019 to €5 million from 2020, or 44 per cent reduction.

As Minister for Finance I have also reduced the Stabilisation Scheme Levy materially and since 2017 no further levies have been charged by the Credit Union Restructuring Board (ReBo). I have also committed to a further review of the Stabilisation Scheme in 2020.

Questions Nos. 58 to 60, inclusive, answered with Question No. 39.

Cybersecurity Data

61. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to a recent report by an organisation (details supplied) which states that there is increased vulnerability of payment systems to information technology failures and cyber attacks; his plans to ensure the integrity of payment systems here as businesses and public bodies move increasingly to electronic payments and towards a cashless society; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46551/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): My officials were aware of the publication of this report. To first address the point about moving towards a cashless society, earlier this year I launched a study commissioned by my Department benchmarking Ireland's payment industry. That study found that cash remains a vital part of the Irish payment system and concluded that a fully cashless society would not be an appropriate objective.

In relation to payment systems, I am informed by the Central Bank that Ireland's retail electronic payments are processed by pan-European based payment systems, primarily the Eurosystem's large value payment system TARGET2 and EBA Clearing's retail payments system STEP2.

Both of these systems have high levels of reliability and resilience, resulting from the very high standards to which they are held. Both systems are subject to Eurosystem oversight, with the ECB having the leading oversight role. Both are assessed against the Systemically Important Payment Systems Regulation, which imposes strict requirements, including in relation to operational risk, business continuity, credit risk, liquidity risk, settlement finality, and participation default rules and procedures.

From the perspective of the Central Bank's supervision of financial institutions that participate in the payments system in Ireland (i.e. banks, payment institutions, etc.), the risks associated with information technology and cyber-attacks are a key concern given the potentially serious implications for prudential soundness, consumer protection, financial stability and the reputation of the Irish financial system.

Strengthening the operational and cyber resilience of the financial system is a key priority for the Central Bank. This includes enhancing the resilience of the firms within that system to operational disruptions due to information technology issues, particularly as these issues can negatively impact on consumers.

The volumes of retail and wholesale payments settled daily are substantial, and issues occur from time to time. Where this happens, the vast majority are resolved within the business day. The Central Bank expects financial institutions to take all necessary steps to minimise the number of occurrences and, when they happen, to respond with appropriate urgency and to minimise the impact on consumers. These expectations are communicated to all firms as part of ongoing supervisory engagement.

Insurance Coverage

62. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the steps he is taking to ensure that insurance cover is made available to businesses in the wider leisure sector at affordable rates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46671/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I acknowledge the general problems faced by businesses in the wider leisure sector, particularly because of the withdrawal of a key insurer that was operating in that market. As the Deputy is aware, the pricing of insurance products is a commercial matter for insurers and neither I, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, have any function in this matter. This position is reinforced by the EU framework for insurance which expressly prohibits Member States from adopting rules which require insurance companies to obtain prior approval of the pricing or terms and conditions of insurance products. Consequently, the Government cannot direct insurance companies to cover certain types of risk, such as those in the leisure sector.

Unfortunately, there is no single policy or legislative "silver bullet" to immediately remedy this issue. In addition, there are many constraints faced by the Government in trying to address it, in particular the fact that for constitutional reasons, it cannot direct the courts as to the award levels that should be applied and as set out above it cannot direct insurance companies as to the pricing level which they should apply.

I wish to emphasise however that insurance issues remains a priority for the Government. The Cost of Insurance Working Group (CIWG), chaired by Minister of State Michael D'Arcy, TD is continuing to work to implement the recommendations of both of its reports. Its most recent Progress Update was published in July and shows that the vast majority of recommendations and actions due by Q2 2019 have been completed. To that end, some key achievements to date from the two reports, include the following:

- The enactment of the *Judicial Council Act 2019*, in July which provides for the establishment of a Personal Injuries Guidelines Committee to provide guidelines to replace the Book of Quantum;

- Reforms to the Personal Injuries Assessment Board through the *Personal Injuries Assessment Board (Amendment) Act 2019* to strengthen the powers of PIAB around compliance with its procedures;

- Amendments to the *Civil Liability and Courts Act 2004* to make it easier for businesses and insurers to challenge cases where fraud or exaggeration is suspected;

- The establishment of the National Claims Information Database in the Central Bank to increase transparency around the future cost of private motor insurance; the Central Bank is currently reviewing the possibility of expanding is scope to cover business insurance; and

- various reforms of how fraud is reported to and dealt with by An Garda Síochána, including increased co-ordination with the insurance industry, as well as the recent decision by the Garda Commissioner to develop a divisional focus on insurance fraud which will be guided by the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau (GNECB) which will also train Gardaí all over the country on investigating insurance fraud, and the recent success under *Operation Coatee*, which targets insurance-related criminality.

I believe that these reforms are having an impact with regard to private motor insurance (CSO figures from August show that the price of motor insurance is now 27.1% lower than the July 2016 peak). The Government is determined to continue working to ensure that these positive pricing trends can be extended to other forms of insurance, including those relevant to businesses. However, undoubtedly the single most essential challenge which must be overcome if there is to be a sustainable reduction in insurance costs particularly for businesses and other operators in the leisure sector is to bring the levels of personal injury damages awarded in this country more in line with those awarded in other jurisdictions, and the establishment of the Judicial Council is crucial in this regard.

In conclusion, I would like to assure the Deputy that important reforms are taking place and that I am confident that if the level of awards are reduced, then the insurance cost and coverage issues that are being experienced by the leisure sector should recede.

EU Budget Contribution

63. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the expected annual increase in the net financial contribution by Ireland to the EU if the UK leaves the EU by the 31 January 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46024/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Given that the UK represents one of the largest net contributors to the EU Budget, Brexit is likely to have a significant impact on the contributions of all Member States, including Ireland's. The exact impact will be dependent on the nature of the final agreement between the EU and the UK regarding its involvement with the EU Budget post-Brexit.

Under the Withdrawal Agreement between the EU and UK, the UK had agreed to continue to pay into the EU Budget for the remaining years of the current MFF, as if it was still a member. This would result in no additional impact on Ireland's contributions or receipts up to the end of the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) in December 2020.

However, if that Withdrawal Agreement is not concluded and there is a no-deal Brexit, the impacts on the EU Budget will need to be clarified. Under this scenario the UK would need to outline its intentions regarding whether it still intended to continue making payments towards the current MFF.

The European Commission has prepared a contingency proposal which establishes a legal basis for the UK to continue to both make payments into the EU budget and to access receipts from it for the year 2020 even in the case of a no-deal scenario. This framework seeks to minimise any unnecessary disruption for beneficiaries of EU spending programmes at the time of withdrawal.

If the UK decided not to continue with EU budget payments, then both the Commission and Member States would need to consider the most appropriate way forward. However, the gap would likely need to be mitigated by either increased contributions from other Member States, reductions in EU funding programmes, or a combination of both.

My Department monitors and analyses the potential impact of Brexit on our EU budget contributions on an ongoing basis. This analysis is based on the best information and data available at the time in question.

Credit Register Administration

64. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to a breach of the Central Credit Register by a bank (details supplied) that resulted in customers being the subject of multiple credit inquiry requests to the registry and a representative body resulting in potential adverse effect on their credit reports by the register and the body and other future lending applications and a digital footprint which cannot be removed for five years; his plans to address same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46550/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Central Bank has established the Central Credit Register (CCR) under the Credit Reporting Act 2013 (the Act).

The Act obliges lenders to:

- submit personal and credit information to the CCR every month on loans of €500 or more;

- access the CCR for an applicant's credit report, when considering loan applications of €2,000 or more.

Lenders may also, if they wish, access the CCR for an applicant's credit report when considering loan applications for less than €2,000. Borrowers may request their credit report at any time free of charge at centralcreditregister.ie.

A sample CCR credit report and explanation is available in the Central Bank's factsheet at https://www.centralcreditregister.ie/media/1312/sample-credit-report-and-explanation.pdf. This indicates that a credit report has four parts:-

Part one shows the personal information submitted to the CCR in respect of a credit information subject.

Part two shows a summary of the active and closed credit agreements entered into by the borrower, and also information on credit applications made by the borrower. In respect of credit applications, the information in this part will include the type of loan product sought and the amount involved. (However, it should be noted that information on credit reports simply records the fact that a credit application has been made and that it does not record whether or not a credit application was approved by a lender or not taken up by the borrower; furthermore, in respect of credit applications, the name of the lending institution to which a credit application was made will be displayed only on the credit report requested by the borrower). Pursuant to section 8 of the Act, information on credit applications is retained for a period of six months (and is available for inclusion in part two only if a credit report is requested during that period).

Part three provides detailed information on outstanding credit agreements.

Part four, which is called the ‘footprint’, is a record of all the dates that a credit report has been seen, by whom and the purpose of the enquiry, and such data is kept pursuant to section 17 of the Act. (On the credit report that is produced for lenders, this ‘footprint’ is visible only for two years but the name of the lender is not published. On the credit report that is produced for borrowers, the footprint is visible for five years, and the name of the lender is published).

In respect of the specific incidence raised by the Deputy, the Central Bank has advised that the lender in question had a valid reason for accessing each applicant’s credit report once. However, searches were duplicated in error due to a technical issue experienced by the lender. This error has since been corrected and the “credit application summary” in part 2 of the relevant credit reports now correctly contains one credit application.

However, as a separate issue and as indicated above, each time a borrower’s credit report is accessed, a digital footprint is created on the credit report. In this case, in the interests of transparency, the digital footprint remains as it properly reflects that more than one enquiry was made. The Central Bank advises that there is no information to suggest that any individual borrower has been disadvantaged as a result of this incident. A borrower who believes that they may have been disadvantaged should contact the lender in question to discuss the matter. As already stated, borrowers can also request their credit report free of charge at www.centralcreditregister.ie. Borrowers have a right to request an amendment to any information that they believe is incomplete, inaccurate or not up to date.

It is important to note that the CCR does not determine if a credit application is approved or not. That decision is solely made by the lender, and aside from the content of the credit report, the decision will also include consideration of other matters such as borrower’s income and assets etc.

More generally, under the Act, lenders are required to ensure that personal data is accurate, complete and up to date. The Central Bank expects that lenders have robust systems and controls in place to ensure the integrity of the data that they submit to the CCR. In the event of an error in reporting, the Central Bank expects the lender to take immediate steps to correct the data and separately to identify the root cause and ensure that the appropriate solution is applied to avoid any recurrence of the error.

The Central Bank also expects lenders to be aware of their own obligations under data protection law, in particular whether a data breach should be reported to the Data Protection Commission. Lenders may under data protection provisions also be required to write to customers explaining what has happened and what action they have taken to correct the errors. This may also require a report being made to the Data Protection Commission by the lender. Private credit bureau operators, which do not fall within the statutory or regulatory remit of the Minister or Central Bank, are nevertheless also subject to these general data protection legislation and requirements.

Help-To-Buy Scheme

65. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has carried out a study regarding the effectiveness of the help to buy scheme. [45239/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In 2017 I commissioned and published an independent review of the Help to Buy (HTB) incentive and last year, I commissioned an independent Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) of HTB. Both reports are available on my Department's website.

In brief, the CBA, confirmed the findings of the independent review as follows:

- Prices: While there may have been a very small increase in prices attributable to the introduction of the incentive, the primary driver of house prices remained the continued misalignment between demand and supply.

- Supply: The evidence suggested that following the introduction of the incentive there was a marked increase in supply which can be attributed in part to HTB.

- Affordability: The analysis also found that availability of HTB had reduced the time to save for all claimants and improved the overall affordability of housing for these individuals.

- Benefit/Cost Ratio: The analysis found a benefit-cost ratio of 1.28 indicating a moderate positive effect for the incentive.

Tax Reliefs Availability

66. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance if consideration will be given to a proposal (details supplied) in relation to tax incentives for persons who provide rental accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45804/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I assume from the details accompanying his question that the deputy is primarily referring to natural persons acting as landlords and income tax based measures.

The Report of the Working Group on the Tax and Fiscal Treatment of Landlords examined the general issue raised in the Deputy's question. It was submitted to me for consideration in September 2017, in advance of its publication on Budget Day, 10 October 2017. The report put forward options for further consideration, rather than recommendations, and any further consideration would require the participation of several Departments and organisations, including my own Department. The ten options are split into short, medium and long-term options. Five potential short-term options were identified as measures which could potentially be implemented within 18 months, i.e. within Budgets 2018 and 2019.

One short-term option was to increase the mortgage interest deduction available to landlords. In this context, it should be noted that in Budget 2017, a phased unwinding of the restriction on interest deductibility over five years for all residential landlords was initiated. The second step, an increase from 80% to 85% deductibility, took effect from 1 January 2018. Budget 2019 accelerated progress in this area and, from 1 January 2019, the restoration of full mortgage interest deductibility for landlords of residential property has been in place.

A further option was to consider introducing Local Property Tax (LPT) deductibility for landlords. Earlier this year, the report of the interdepartmental review of LPT noted that LPT is a relatively small expense and therefore is unlikely to make a significant difference to the position of any individual landlord in cash terms and so may not be regarded by landlords as a sufficient measure to encourage them to stay in or enter the rental market. The report also found that the measure would also have a deadweight cost in respect of landlords who do not intend to leave the rental market and would create a more favourable position for landlords of property compared to owner-occupiers, as owner-occupiers cannot claim a tax deduction for LPT.

In Budget 2018 I introduced another of the short-term options, deductibility for pre-letting expenditure for previously vacant properties. This measure applies to residential premises which have been vacant for at least 12 months and which are then let after the date of the passing of the Finance Act 2017, i.e. after 25 December 2017. The expenditure is allowed as a deduction against rental income from that premises. It applies to expenses that would be allowable if they had been incurred while the property was let, such as the cost of repairs, insurance, maintenance and management of the property. Certain limitations are in place regarding this measure, for example the expenditure must have been incurred in the 12 months before the premises is let as a residential premises. The total deduction allowed is capped at €5,000 per vacant premises and the deduction will be clawed-back if the property ceases to be let as a residential premises within four years of the first letting. I prioritised this option as it was specifically designed to encourage an overall increase in housing supply by bringing currently vacant property back into residential use.

The final short-term option was to improve the collection and sharing of data on the rental accommodation sector. A significant issue that hampered the progress of the Working Group was a lack of robust data on various elements of the housing market, due to the differing metrics used by the various agencies. The Housing Analytics Group, chaired by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, is currently active and a number of Departments and agencies are involved in its work, including the Residential Tenancies Board, the Central Statistics Office (CSO), Revenue and the Department of Finance.

Five of the options put forward in the report were medium-term and long-term options. Medium-term options are measures which work with the current tax system but might take longer to develop and implement, and as such would require a longer lead-in period. The long-term options look at the potential for more fundamental changes to the tax system, and so would require significantly greater resource commitments to progress. Consideration of these options will continue within the relevant time frames.

As the Deputy will be aware, taxation is only one of the policy levers available to the Government through which to boost rental and overall housing supply and that, in line with the Tax Expenditure Guidelines, consideration of whether a tax measure is the most appropriate policy tool for a given purpose would be required. Ireland's past experience with tax incentives in the housing sector strongly suggests the need for a cautionary stance when considering intervention in the rental sector. There are many competing priorities which must be considered when deciding which policy measures to introduce and the rental sector is just one of many other sectors that may require assistance and intervention.

NAMA Operations

67. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the expected NAMA surplus to be transferred to the Exchequer in 2020; the way in which it will be utilised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46688/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As part of its Annual Report for 2018, NAMA revised its projected surplus to be returned to the State upwards to €4 billion. This was reaffirmed in the Section 53 Annual Statement 2020 which was recently laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. The realisation of this surplus depends on the success of NAMA's ongoing deleveraging and completion of its Dublin Docklands SDZ and residential funding programmes.

Surplus funds may only be returned to the Central Fund once NAMA's subordinated debt and equity obligations have been repaid in full, which is expected to be by summer of 2020. It is estimated that €2 billion will be transferred in H2 2020 with a further €2 billion being transferred during 2021. This timeline is contingent on NAMA's projected surplus of €4 billion remaining unchanged and is subject to prevailing market conditions in realising the remaining assets.

Any NAMA surplus paid, while Exchequer positive, will not impact the general government balance, in line with Eurostat rules. It will be a decision for the Government as to how any surplus returned by NAMA will be utilised within the framework of the fiscal rules at that time. The intention has always been to use such receipts from the resolution of the financial sector crisis to pay down our national debt and reduce our debt servicing costs.

Tax Reliefs Availability

68. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if, in view of the ongoing controversy in the film industry regarding the requirement to provide quality employment and training as a condition for receiving section 481 film tax relief, her views on whether the employer must be clearly identified as the Irish producer company that applies for the relief rather than a short lived designated activity company which only exists for the duration of the film; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45503/19]

70. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if will he consider further changes to section 481 film tax relief in order to ensure that receiving that relief is strictly conditional on the clear identification of the employer responsible for creating quality employment and training and that the said employer cannot be a short-lived DAC company but rather must be the Irish producer company standing behind the DAC; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46679/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 68 and 70 together.

The Deputy will be aware that a number of amendments were made to the Film tax credit in Section 481 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 as part of Finance Act 2018.

I legislated to split the certification process between Revenue and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DCHG). Production companies are now required to apply to the DCHG before commencement of Irish production to have the film certified as a qualifying film.

As part of the application process, applicants must provide a skills development plan and, if the amount of eligible expenditure is over €2m, that plan must be agreed with Screen Ireland. Additionally, a post project skills development report is required for each project.

In terms of quality employment, the monitoring of compliance with employment rights legislation is primarily a matter for the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, through the Workplace Relations Commission. However, as part of the new certification process to be undertaken by DCHG, an applicant company is required to sign an undertaking of compliance with all relevant employment legislation. This undertaking is required to be signed and furnished with every section 481 application.

These conditions shall be met not just by a producer company but also by the qualifying company or, as the Deputy has phrased it, the Designated Activity Company. If a producer does not comply with the employment and skills development requirements set out by the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, any amount already claimed may be recoverable, with interest.

I have further been advised by my officials that, following a joint request by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), the Services, Industry, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), and Screen Producers Ireland, the WRC has agreed to undertake an audit of the Republic of Ireland Independent Film and Television Drama Production Sector with a view to examining industrial relations generally, employment practices and procedure, assessing issues arising (if any), and making recommendations for their improvement where appropriate.

The timeframe for receiving submissions on this matter has now closed. My officials will be analysing the results of this process once a report is published.

Tax Credits

69. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance when the personal income tax credit was initially raised to €1,650; when the employee tax credit was raised to €1,650; the cumulative inflation since; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46025/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Personal Tax Credit and the Employee (or PAYE) Tax Credit were both reduced from €1,830 to €1,650 in Budget 2011 in the context of the financial crisis. This took effect from 1 January 2011. Cumulative inflation in the period from 2011 to 2018 has been of the order of 3.5 per cent.

General increases to tax credits result in an increase in a level of income that is effectively exempt from income tax. It is estimated that in 2020, some 28 per cent of taxpayer units will be exempt from income tax and USC. An increase in the Personal and Employee Tax Credits would be likely to increase the proportion of earners who are exempt from income tax and would also narrow the income tax base. In addition, it would give rise to calls to increase the value of the Earned Income Tax Credit which applies to self-employed persons.

During the financial crisis our income tax base narrowed to the point where 45 per cent of taxpayers were exempt from income tax. This was unsustainable and placed a disproportionate burden on those who were within the tax net to provide the tax revenues needed for public services and social supports.

It is the Government's position that earners start to pay the marginal rate of tax at too low an income level and it is committed to reducing excessive tax rates for low and middle income earners while also keeping the tax base broad.

As a result of changes in recent Budgets, USC rates have been reduced to 0.5%, 2% and 4.5%. The income level at which taxpayers begin to pay the higher rate of tax has also been increased by €2,500 and there have been increases in both the Home Carer Tax Credit and the Earned Income Credit. The impact of these changes is that the top marginal rate on incomes up to €70,000 has been reduced from 52% to 48.5%.

Question No. 70 answered with Question No. 68.

Economic Growth

71. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which the

economic fundamentals continue to remain stable, notwithstanding international pressures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46603/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): On the back of another strong year for the economy in 2018, momentum continued in the first half of this year with GDP up 6 ½ percent in year-on-year terms. Modified domestic demand, which adjusts for distortions in the Irish economy, was up 2.3 per cent over the first half of the year, a solid performance, though a moderation on 2018. The best barometer of our current economic performance is the labour market, where strong growth in employment over the last number of years has continued into this year. Total employment increased by 63,100 (+2.8 per cent) in the first half of 2019, while the unemployment rate for October, fell below 5 per cent for the first time since 2007.

As a small open economy Ireland is particularly exposed to external risks which are firmly tilted to the downside at present. First and foremost is the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the UK's decision to exit the EU. Secondly, any further disruption to trade or a more pronounced slowdown in global growth would have a disproportionate impact on the Irish economy.

Regarding Brexit, the Budget 2020 central scenario projections assumed that the UK would leave the EU without ratification of the Withdrawal Agreement, i.e. a disorderly exit. Under this scenario, GDP growth of just 0.7 per cent would be in prospect next year, reflecting both the impact of Brexit and the continued weakness in the global outlook. However, given recent events in the UK and the 'flextension' granted by the EU, a disorderly Brexit in 2020 is less likely - although still possible — than it was only a few weeks ago. Nevertheless, any form of Brexit will have a negative impact on the Irish economy.

The best way we can mitigate against these risks is through prudent budgetary policy, careful management of the public finances and by focusing on competitiveness-oriented policies.

VAT Rate Application

72. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance the reason for the difference in the VAT registration threshold for the sale of services versus the sale of goods; if he will review the anomaly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46497/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that VAT is governed by the EU VAT Directive (Council Directive 2006/112/EC), with which Irish VAT law must comply.

There is no anomaly to be reviewed. Article 284 of the Directive permits Ireland to maintain two thresholds - €75,000 for goods and €37,500 for services - and only permits an increase in these thresholds to maintain their value in real terms, that is they may only be increased in line with inflation and for no other reason. Ireland could have one threshold, but that threshold would have to be the lower one of €37,500.

The distinction between the supply of goods and the supply of services is a feature of the EU VAT Directive and Irish VAT legislation. The value added in relation to a supply of a good is the difference between the purchase price and the sale price, while the value added in the supply of a service will generally be a much higher percentage of the price charged and involve a significant direct input by the business proprietor or his or her employees.

Tax Code

73. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the Franco-German proposal for a minimum price for carbon taxation in the EU; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46130/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In a Multi Financial Framework (MFF) context, while the idea of a Carbon Border Adjustment has been raised informally, my Department has not seen any formal proposal from the European Commission or from France and I cannot provide views on a proposal which I have not seen.

Although Ireland is open to considering any new proposal on a possible new Own Resource for the EU Budget, from a practical perspective we believe this may slow down negotiations at this stage of the process and delay any final agreement.

Mortgage Arrears Rate

74. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Finance his views on mortgage lenders imposing legal fees and other charges on borrowers in arrears who are co-operating with their bank to resolve the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46554/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I have been advised by the Central Bank of Ireland (the Central Bank) that they have recently concluded an investigation into the practice of charging costs associated with the legal process, including third party costs (the costs) to borrowers in mortgage arrears and charging of interest on those costs.

In summary, their investigation concluded that:

1. Applying the costs prior to the conclusion of repossession proceedings and prior to the decision by a Court to award the costs to the regulated entity is not in borrowers' best interests. Additionally, it is not in the borrower's best interests to apply the costs prior to settlement between the parties concerned or prior to the borrower being in a position to redeem the mortgage and requesting to do so;

2. Pursuant to the terms of the European Union (Consumer Mortgage Credit Agreements) Regulations 2016 (the 'CMCAR'), charging interest on the costs at any point is contrary to Regulation 29 (2) of the CMCAR.

On 23 October 2019, the Central Bank issued an industry letter to Credit Institutions, Credit Servicing Firms and Retail Credit Firms setting out its expectations in relation to applying the costs and charging interest on the costs. Additionally, the Central Bank reminded all regulated entities of existing obligations under the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears 2013 (the CCMA), including the restriction on imposing charges and/or surcharge interest on arrears, unless the borrower has been classed as not co-operating. A copy of the letters issued can be found on their website: https://www.centralbank.ie/regulation/consumer-protection/consumer-protection-codes-regulations

As the Deputy will appreciate, as in any Central Bank investigation, no details of investigations can be shared until the investigation is complete and so I am unable to comment further.

Question No. 75 answered with Question No. 40.

Insurance Costs

76. **Deputy Jan O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance the steps he is taking to ensure more transparency on the part of insurance companies on premiums charged, cases contested or uncontested and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40870/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Introducing greater transparency into the insurance sector is a priority of the Cost of Insurance Working Group (CIWG) and much work has been done on this front to date.

For example, on 1st November the Central Bank introduced new rules in relation to transparency in motor insurance costs. The new rules require insurers to provide policyholders with details of the prior year's premium paid, as well as quotations for each policy option available to them (such as comprehensive, third party fire and theft and third party only). In addition, the renewal notification period has been extended from 15 to 20 working days for motor, health, property and general liability insurance to allow policyholders more time to seek comparison quotes The background to these new rules is a recommendation from the Cost of Insurance Working Group Report on the Cost of Motor Insurance and the changes have been made through amendments to the Non-Life Insurance (Provision of Information) (Renewal of Policy of Insurance) Regulations 2007 (S.I. No.74). I believe that each of these measures should assist consumers in making decisions at renewal time, including encouraging them to shop around and, if favourable to them, switch insurance provider.

In addition, the Government is actively supporting a Private Members Bill - Consumer Insurance Contracts Bill, which is scheduled at Report Stage in the Dail this week and should progress through the Oireachtas by the end of the year. The purpose of the Bill is to reform and modernise the law of consumer insurance contracts and to level the playing field between consumers and insurers. This Bill has various provisions aimed at increasing transparency in premiums charged and the management of claims. A notable change, which is based on a recommendation of the Cost of Insurance Working Group, will be the requirements for insurers to inform policy holders, including small businesses, in circumstances where a claim has been made against them by a third party. Such communications have not always occurred and the implementation of this provision will therefore be a significant step forward in improving transparency around the claims process.

Furthermore, with the publication shortly of the first report of the National Claims Information Database on private motor insurance, there should be much greater transparency around the settlement of claims process and how this occurs. It is hoped that this information together with a recalibrated level of awards to be developed by the Judiciary as a result of the enactment of the Judicial Council Act 2019 should lead to a greater consistency of award levels, thus enhancing the role of Personal Injuries Assessment Board (PIAB) and reducing litigation levels.

Mortgage Lending

77. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Finance if exceptions open to banks in applying the mortgage lending rules of the Central Bank can be targeted at first-time buyers and those who fall just above the income limits for the Rebuilding Ireland home loan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46641/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Central Bank carries out an annual review of the mortgage measures, including the key parameters of the LTV and LTI limits and the allowances allowed above these limits. The 2019 review is currently underway and the results will be announced in early December. The annual review considers whether the measures continue to meet the objectives of strengthening bank and borrower resilience and reducing the likelihood and impact of a credit-house price spiral emerging.

The system of allowances give the banks discretion to lend above the LTV and LTI limits. These are separated based on whether a borrower is a first-time buyer (FTB) or not. For FTBs, 20% of new lending to FTBs can take place above the 3.5 times LTI limit. As the 90% LTV limit is already set higher for FTBs, only 5% of new lending to FTBs can exceed this limit. These allowances are targeted to FTBs in that they can only be used for FTB lending. Separate allowances exist for second-time buyer (SSB) new lending.

Within the FTB allowances, there are no rules in place around which types of FTB borrowers would receive the allowances. This is a matter for individual lenders, based on an evaluation of each specific borrower and the lender's own credit policies. An important feature of the measures is that the limits are in addition to individual banks' credit policies and are not a substitute for lenders' responsibilities to assess affordability and lend prudently.

Therefore, subject to the requirement to comply with the provisions of the macro-prudential mortgage lending rules, the Central Bank Consumer Protection Code and other regulatory requirements, it remains the responsibility of an individual lender to assess the credit worthiness of an individual and to decide whether or not to provide a loan in any particular case, or how much credit to provide in any particular case.

The data on new lending under the mortgage measures and the usage of the allowances is published on the Central Bank's website every six months. This shows that for the first six months of 2019, 16% of new lending to FTBs was at an LTI above 3.5 times.

Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman

78. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he is satisfied with the ability of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman to act in the interest of aggrieved parties that are facing issues with their financial service provider; his views on whether the service offered to consumers could be improved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46528/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Firstly, I must point out that the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of his statutory functions. I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which he takes.

As the Deputy will be aware the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Act 2017 which commenced on 1 January 2018 established the Office of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

One of the main roles of the Ombudsman is to investigate, mediate and adjudicate complaints about the conduct of financial or pension service providers. The FSPO was established to provide an alternative to the Courts for consumers who have unresolved disputes with a financial or pension service provider and all investigations by the Ombudsman are free of charge to the consumer. Subject only to an appeal to the High Court, a finding of the Ombudsman in respect of a complaint is legally binding on all parties

The FSPO has advised me that the office has an important role in redressing the balance of power between the individual consumer and provider. The FSPO does this by making its service as informal and accessible as possible. It mediates between the parties and where necessary it investigates and issues legally binding decisions. The Ombudsman has the power to direct a financial service provider to pay compensation of up to €500,000 to a complainant. He can also direct that a financial service provider rectify the conduct that is the subject of the complaint. There is no limit to the value of rectification he can direct.

The FSPO's Strategic Plan 2018-2021 aims to ensure it operates in a way that contributes to promoting the best interests of consumers and actual or potential beneficiaries of financial or pension services in the efficient and effective handling of complaints. The FSPO inherited 3,178 complaints from its predecessor bodies and received 5,692 complaints in 2018. It closed 4,443 complaints in 2018 leaving a balance of 4,427 complaints on hand at the end of 2018. Such high volumes of complaints cause the FSPO to be unable to process complaints as quickly as it would wish to.

The FSPO's Strategic Plan recognised the increasing number of complaints and anticipates a further increase in the coming years. The overall objective of this Plan is to ensure that the organisation can deal efficiently with this increase and to enhance the experience of its customers by delivering its services faster and better. In order to deliver the objectives in its Strategic Plan the FSPO submitted a Workforce Plan to my Department and I approved the recruitment of an additional 35 staff earlier this year.

The FSPO has been proactively recruiting to fill these posts. However, similar to many public sector bodies, the current buoyant job market is making it difficult for the office to retain staff. This is mainly because the FSPO's highly trained staff are much sought after in both the public and private sector. The FSPO inherited 53 staff from its predecessor bodies in January 2018. However, despite recruiting and appointing additional 42 staff since then, it currently has 59 staff.

The Ombudsman has further informed me that additional staff will be joining it before the end of the year and that he will continue to recruit and train quality people to assist it to deliver on its mandate. The FSPO will continue to provide the most effective and efficient service possible in spite of the staff losses within the office.

Tax Code

79. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 50 of 26 September 2019, the way in which he can address the unfairness for persons cohabiting, in many cases in long-term relationships, and those without children through other possible measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46527/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am aware of the points raised by the Deputy in her Parliamentary Question of 26 September, 2019 and in her correspondence which has been received in my Department with regard to the operation of Capital Acquisitions Tax.

For the purposes of Capital Acquisitions Tax, the relationship between the person who provides the gift or inheritance and the person who receives the gift or inheritance determines the lifetime tax-free threshold (the Group Threshold) below which gift or inheritance tax does not arise. As Capital Acquisitions Tax is generally payable by the beneficiary, rather than the disponer, the system promotes horizontal equity in that all individuals with similar circumstances are treated in a similar manner.

It is a long-held principle of inheritance tax that transfers of assets between spouses are exempt. The spousal exemption from inheritance tax was extended to civil partners from 1 January 2011.

As regards the gifting of a shared home, the treatment of gifting was amended substantially in the 2016 Finance Act. In general, it is now only possible to receive a tax-free gift of a dwelling house where it is gifted to a dependent relative. A dependent relative is a direct relative of the donor, or of the donor's spouse or civil partner, who is permanently and totally incapacitated because of physical or mental infirmity from maintaining himself or herself or who is over the age of 65. This change was made to restore the original policy aim of the relief.

Gifts are generally taxable in the same way as inheritances. There is an annual €3,000 CAT relief available to all recipients of gifts.

As regards the treatment of individuals with no children, gifts or inheritances from them are subject to either category B or C thresholds irrespective of their individual status. There would be a significant potential Exchequer cost with any extension of the Category A threshold to allow individuals with no children to nominate a potential beneficiary of their estate.

There are some CAT reliefs which are available for co-habiting couples. Cohabiting individuals can avail of the 'dwelling house exemption' to bequeath their principal private residence, generally the most substantial asset owned by an individual, free from inheritance tax which allows for property to be inherited tax-free irrespective of its value where the beneficiary is already living in the house subject to certain conditions.

Section 88A of the Capital Acquisitions Tax Consolidation Act 2003 exempts transfers of property made between qualified cohabitants within the meaning of Part 15 of the Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants (CPCROC) Act 2010. This is a redress scheme which provides protection in law for long-term cohabiting couples and provides safeguards for an economically dependent cohabitant where a relationship has ended, or on death.

The introduction of the exemption from gift tax and inheritance tax in these cases did not give cohabiting couples the same tax treatment as married couples or civil partners but simply legislated for the tax consequences of the redress arrangements for cohabitants under the CPCROC Act 2010.

I would say that any change in the tax treatment of cohabiting couples, including with respect to CAT, can only be addressed in the broader context of future social and legal policy development in relation to such couples. There would also be potentially significant Exchequer costs in changing the current CAT rules to accommodate the changes sought by the Deputy.

Tax Reliefs Availability

80. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider providing income tax relief for the long-term lease of residential homes to address security of tenure in view of the success of a similar measure in the agricultural sector under section 664 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 as amended by the Finance Act 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46496/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I understand that the Deputy is proposing that income tax relief, similar to that which is provided for under Section 644 TCA 1997, would apply where landlords provide long-term leases of residential properties. As the Deputy will be aware, decisions by me in relation to the Tax Acts are made in the context of the annual Budget and Finance Bill process. However, bearing in mind the issues outlined below, I am not minded, at this time, to support a proposal along the lines of that put forward in the Deputy's question.

Generally, rental income, after deduction of allowable letting expenses, is subject to tax as part of the total taxable income of a landlord. Individual landlords are subject to income tax on all their income combined, at the applicable rates, including USC and PRSI where appropriate.

Section 664 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (‘*relief for certain income from leasing of farm land* ’) provides for the exemption of certain income from the leasing of farm land, where the land is let under a qualifying lease. This particular relief was designed to encourage longer term leases of farm land, with the targeted policy objective of assisting with the mobility and productive use of agricultural land.

When considering the introduction of any tax expenditure measure, my officials undertake an evaluation of the proposal in accordance with the Department of Finance Tax Expenditure Guidelines. An evaluation will seek to address issues such as identification of the market failure, the policy rationale for intervention, cost, and whether a tax based measure is the most efficient form of intervention. With regard to the latter point, in many cases a market failure may be more appropriately remedied by a direct expenditure measure or through regulation. Other considerations include the potential for deadweight costs, the potential cost of the tax revenue foregone to the Exchequer and the scope for abuse.

Furthermore, Ireland’s past experience with tax incentives in the housing sector strongly suggests the need for a cautionary stance when considering intervention in the rental sector. There are many competing priorities which must be considered when deciding which policy measures to introduce and the rental sector is just one of many other sectors that may require assistance and intervention. I must be mindful of the many demands on the Exchequer and the need to maintain a broad base of taxation.

Finally, as the Deputy may be aware, in Finance Act 2018, and with effect from 1 January 2019, I provided for the full restoration of the amount of interest that may be deducted by landlords in respect of loans used to purchase, improve or repair their residential property, as a means to support the rental sector.

Tax Collection Forecasts

81. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to propose an annual review of performance of his Department in tax forecasting. [45802/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): My Department periodically reviews its approach to tax forecasting, with the most recent full review published in 2008.

A new review group has been established with a mandate to review and assess tax forecasting methodology over the past decade. The Tax Forecasting Methodology Review Group is composed of members of various institutions, both domestic and international, engaged in tax forecasting so that relevant experience can be shared. The group’s analysis has focused on the composition of the Irish tax take and the accuracy of forecasts and involves examining the information bases upon which forecasts are made.

The group has to date met on six occasions, with one further meeting planned before its Report is finalised. The group aims to issue the Report before year-end with recommendations, where appropriate, for changes to the current tax forecasting methodology.

Finally, I would point out that my Department has, since 2018, published an Annual Report on Taxation, outlining the main trends in the key tax heads over a longer time horizon.

EU Budget Contribution

82. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Finance the contributions of Ireland to the EU in each of the years 2015 to 2018 and to date in 2019; the estimated future contributions in each of the next three years from 2020 onwards; the principal reasons for the increase in contributions by Ireland; the basis of the calculation of the contribution; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46552/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The contributions of each Member State to the EU Budget include Traditional Own Resources (Customs Duties) and a portion of VAT, with the remainder coming from Gross National Income (GNI).

The following table outlines the Irish contribution to the EU Budget for each of the 2015 to 2018 and to date in 2019. These figures include Traditional Own Resources.

Year	Payments to the EU Budget €m
2015	1,952
2016	2,023
2017	2,016
2018	2,519
2019 (up to 1 November 2019)	2,288

Contributions to the EU Budget are contingent on a number of variables, including updated GNI growth, the size of the overall EU Budget expenditure for any individual year and other EU Budget operational developments.

The current estimated contribution for the coming years is presented in the following table.

Year	Estimated Payments to the EU Budget €m 1% Ceiling	Estimated Payments to the EU Budget €m 1.11% Ceiling
2020	2,800	N/A
2021	2,575	2,900
2022	2,600	2,950
2023	2,775	3,125

* Note: contributions in 2021 under a 1% ceiling are lower than contributions in 2020 due to a number of factors: differing expenditure profiles, differing economic baselines (EU27 vs. EU28) and the inclusion of adjustments (balancing payments) in 2020 which are not part of the 2021 calculations yet.

As the Deputy will be aware, the annual EU Budget is agreed within the ceilings of Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The European Commission's proposal for the 2021-2027 MFF was published on 2nd May 2018. This is the starting point of an important ongoing debate on the future of the EU Budget.

Ireland is forecast to see significant growth in our contributions as part of the next MFF as a result of continued economic growth, increased expenditure and the departure of the UK.

Banking Sector

83. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Finance if he has reviewed or plans to review the use by banks of exceptions that are possible within the lending criteria set by the Central Bank; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46640/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Central Bank of Ireland has an overall and independent responsibility to promote and protect financial stability and the mortgage lending measures introduced in 2015 are an important tool available to the Bank for that purpose.

In that context, the Central Bank carries out an annual review of the mortgage measures, including the key parameters of the LTV and LTI limits and the allowances allowed above these limits. The 2019 review is currently underway and the Central Bank has informed me that the results will be announced in early December. The annual review considers whether the measures continue to meet the objectives of strengthening bank and borrower resilience and reducing the likelihood and impact of a credit-house price spiral emerging.

The system of allowances give the banks discretion to lend above the LTV and LTI limits. The allowances vary by limit and by borrower type. For the LTV limit for second-time buyers (SSBs) and for the LTI limit for first-time buyers (FTBs), banks can lend up to 20% of the value of new lending in any given year above those limits. For the LTI limit for second-time buyers, up to 10% of new lending can take place above the limit. For the higher LTV limit for first-time buyers of 90%, only 5% of new lending is allowed above this level.

The data on new lending under the mortgage measures and the usage of the allowances is published on the Central Bank's website every six months. This shows that for the first six months of 2019, 16% of new lending to FTBs was at an LTI above 3.5 times and 16% of new lending to SSBs took place above the 80% LTV limit.

Commissions of Investigation

84. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach the projected costs in regard to the Commission of Investigation into IBRC. [46455/19]

The Taoiseach: From the time of its establishment in June 2015 to the end of October this year the IBRC Commission of Investigation spent €6,682,000 approx. This does not include third party legal costs which have been incurred but not yet paid.

The Commission's Sixth Interim Report, dated 27 March 2019, provided an estimated final cost of the completion of the first module of its investigation, regarding the Siteserv transaction, of €11 million to €14 million. However, this estimate assumes the investigation is completed in accordance with the timetable set out in the Interim Report and excludes costs or delays associated with judicial review hearings. The Commission also acknowledges that it also involves a substantial degree of uncertainty regarding the amount of costs actually recoverable by parties before the Commission, and it assumes the Commission's Legal Costs Guidelines are not successfully challenged.

As I have informed Opposition party representatives, my Department continues to be of the view that the final cost is likely to significantly exceed the Commission's estimate, and could be of the order of €30m.

Naval Service Vessels

85. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the position regarding the patrol vessel LÉ Ciara; his plans to upgrade same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46743/19]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): My priority as Minister with Responsibility for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service is maintained to the greatest extent possible. This is primarily to enable the Defence Forces to carry out their roles as assigned by Government as set out in the White Paper on Defence. Equipment priorities for the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service are being considered in the context of the lifetime of the White Paper on Defence as part of the capability development and equipment planning process.

The White Paper underpins the ongoing replacement of the Naval Service fleet. A significant investment over recent years has been on the procurement of new Off-Shore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) for the Naval Service. The fourth ship in the programme, LÉ George Bernard Shaw, was commissioned into service in May 2019 reflecting an investment by the Government of over €250 million in the new ships programme since 2010. The four ships are performing well in operational service.

Naval Service ships are required to complete drydock maintenance, survey and inspection, twice during each ship five (5) year cycle. An intermediate drydock is carried out between two and a half (2.5) and three (3) years. A full drydock is carried out at five (5) years. Naval Service Ships which are beyond their originally projected thirty (30) year asset life, are drydocked for inspection every year, in order to manage ageing hull risk.

Notwithstanding the capital maintenance programme (for drydocks) detailed above, Naval Service ships are required to undertake planned routine and non-routine maintenance on plant and machinery every day, 365 days a year, regardless of whether the ship is on patrol, undertaking Maritime Defence and Security Operations (MDSO) or alongside the Naval Base off Sailing Order. LÉ Ciara is one of three ships in the current flotilla that are over 30 years old (LÉ Eithne and LÉ Ciara were built in 1984 and LÉ Orla was built in 1985). Accordingly, LÉ Ciara is currently undergoing a planned annual dry-docking.

The White Paper provides for the replacement of the current Naval Service flagship LÉ Eithne with a multi role vessel (MRV) which will be enabled for helicopter operations and will also have a freight carrying capacity. It is the intention to hold a public tender competition in due course to cover the supply of the MRV subject to the availability of funding within the overall Defence capital funding envelope. The cost of the MRV will only be known once the tender competition is concluded.

Future Naval Service capabilities are being planned as part of the White Paper project planning process which will determine the Defence Organisation's maritime capability requirements.

Pension Provisions

86. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence he reason the widow of a person (details supplied) has not received a widow's and orphan's pension. [46766/19]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): My Department has not received any direct communication in relation to a pension in this case.

The Deputy has helpfully given an Army service number and I have been advised that records have been located which indicate that the former officer in question served in the Permanent Defence Force from July 1940 to June 1946.

The former officer in question did not have the minimum of 12 years pensionable service required to be eligible for a pension under the Defence Forces Superannuation Schemes and consequently there would not be an entitlement to a spouse's or children's pension under the Schemes.

The individual also had service in the Reserve of Officers First Line. However, the service in question is not pensionable service.

Passport Data

87. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade further to Parliamentary Question No. 110 of 5 November 2019, the number of instances in the past 20 years to date data (details supplied) was accessed by An Garda Síochána, the Defence Forces, the Airport Police Service and other public authorities; the number of complaints lodged by Irish passport holders regarding the access of the data; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46852/19]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department is fully committed to keeping all personal data submitted by its customers, safe and secure during administrative processes.

It is not possible to provide the number of requests over the past twenty years as section 41 of the Data Protection Act 2018 only came into force in May 2018.

A case management system was instituted in January 2019 to provide more accessible statistics for these type of requests.

There have been 2,198 requests for information under section 41 of the Data Protection Act 2018 since January 2019 to date.

It is not possible to give further information on the details of these requests, as due to the requirement that suitable and specific measures are taken to safeguard the fundamental rights and freedoms of data subjects, my Department is not privy as to why the information is being sought by the public authority. They request information pursuant to Section 41 of the Data Protection Act 2018. It should be noted that in An Garda Siochána, the requests are authorised at Chief Superintendent level.

Prior to January 2019, a manually operated system was in place from May 2018. My Department will be in contact with the Deputy directly on providing statistics from May 2018 until January 2019 as it will take time to manually collate this data.

I can confirm that there have been no complaints lodged by Irish passport holders in view of Section 41 of the Data Protection Act 2018.

Tax Code

88. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Finance if research has been carried out with regard to the economic and social impact an increase in carbon tax will have on those living in rural Ireland. [43659/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As part of a joint research programme between the Department of Finance, the Revenue Commissioners and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), the ESRI published research on the impacts of increases in the carbon tax, including distributional impacts. This research paper can be accessed at: https://www.esri.ie/publications/the-economic-and-environmental-impacts-of-increasing-the-irish-carbon-tax.

In June 2019, the ESRI published a special article, Carbon taxation in Ireland: Distributional effects of revenue recycling policies. This special article examined the distributional effects of increases in the carbon tax for urban and rural households as well as the distributional effects of different revenue recycling mechanisms.

This article can be accessed at: https://www.esri.ie/news/a-well-designed-carbon-tax-could-reduce-emissions-and-alleviate-income-inequality.

I recognise that the research points to carbon tax increases disproportionately impacting low income and rural households. In order to minimise the impact of the increase on heating costs, I have delayed the increase on home heating fuels until 1st May 2020. I am also increasing the fuel allowance by €2 per week. This increase applies from the first of January 2020 and means an annual increase of €56 to each household. Based on the findings from the aforementioned ESRI research, this will leave the 370,000 households who are in receipt of the fuel allowance better off than before the increase in the carbon tax. This ensures that the most vulnerable in society are protected from the increased carbon tax.

Alongside this I am providing increases to programmes that help to address the causes of fuel poverty. The Warmer Homes scheme provides free energy efficiency upgrades to households deemed to be in or at risk of energy poverty. This reduces the energy required to heat a home adequately, thus reducing a household's exposure to increases in energy costs. This will be more effective in the long run at reducing heating costs than increases in the fuel allowance. An extra €13m will be provided for this scheme in 2020, bringing its total budget allocation for the year to over €50m.

These measures will help to protect the most vulnerable in society from the impact of the carbon tax increases in the short, medium and long term.

Tax Code

89. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance the reason large polluters such as the airline sector were not considered for increased carbon related taxation as a means to make carbon taxes more equitable in view of the increase in carbon taxes and related climate change mitigation expenses being levied on many persons and households in budget 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42280/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The overarching legislative framework for the taxation of aviation fuels used in intra EU and international flights is in EU and international laws. EU Directive 2003/96/EC on the taxation of energy products and electricity, commonly known as the Energy Tax Directive, requires Member States to exempt certain fuels used for commercial aviation purposes from excise duty. The scope of this exemption must include jet fuel (which is the most commonly used heavy oil in air navigation) and must encompass such fuel used for intra-Community and international air transport purposes.

A Member State may waive this exemption where it has entered into a bilateral agreement with another Member State to tax fuel for intra-community flights. With regard to fuel for international transport, the scope for a Member State to take a unilateral approach to taxation is limited by international law and a range of bilateral and multilateral agreements that operate under 1944 Convention on International Civil Aviation (known as the Chicago Convention).

I am informed by Revenue that the breakdown of taxes levied on the different types of aviation fuel as provided for under the Finance Act 1999 and Energy Tax Directive are shown in the following table.

Aviation Fuel/Use	Energy Tax Directive	Finance Act 1999
Light oil (aviation gasoline) used for domestic commercial aviation	No mandatory tax exemption, Member States may opt to exempt or partially exempt	Partial relief from MOT, effective rate of €369.42 per 1,000 litres (section 97B Finance Act 1999)
Light oil (aviation gasoline) used for intra-Community/international commercial aviation	No mandatory tax exemption, Member States may opt to exempt or partially exempt	Partial relief from MOT, effective rate of €369.42 per 1,000 litres (section 97B Finance Act 1999)
Light oil (aviation gasoline) used for private pleasure flying	Mandatory taxation	Full MOT rate of €601.69 per 1,000 litres (section 96 Finance Act 1999)
Heavy oil (jet fuel) used for domestic commercial aviation	No mandatory tax exemption, Member States may opt to exempt or partially exempt	Full exemption (section 100(2)(b) Finance Act 1999)
Heavy oil (jet fuel) used for used for intra-Community/international commercial aviation	Mandatory tax exemption, except where bilateral arrangement entered into with another Member State	Full exemption (section 100(2)(b) Finance Act 1999)
Heavy oil (jet fuel) used for private pleasure flying	Mandatory taxation	Full MOT rate of €494.90 per 1,000 litres (section 100(2)(b) Finance Act 1999)

Since 2012, CO_2 emissions from the aviation sector have been included in the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) and the sector is therefore subject to a carbon pricing mechanism.

European Central Bank

90. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the key steps which should be recommended to the new Lagarde leadership of the European Central Bank to stimulate the slowing EU economy. [45808/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The ECB’s mandate is to maintain price stability in the euro area. The Central Bank of Ireland contributes to the formulation of monetary policy at Eurosystem level, and further details of this? are set out in the Bank’s Annual Report.

The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union prohibits the ECB from seeking or taking instructions from EU institutions or bodies, from any government of an EU Member State, or from any other body. These requirements are set out in Article 130 of the Treaty and ensure that the principle of central bank independence is respected and there is no influence on the members of the ECB’s decision-making bodies. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for me to make recommendations such as the Deputy suggests.

Tax Yield

91. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance when revenue from the carbon tax will be ring-fenced for the purpose of a just transition in the midlands; the timeframe for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46781/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In Budget 2020 I announced that all new revenues arising from the increase in the rate of carbon tax would be ring-fenced for climate action purposes. It is estimated that the €6 increase in the rate of carbon tax will raise approximately €90 million additional revenue in 2020. These funds will be used to protect those most exposed to higher fuel and energy costs, to build a Just Transition and to support new investment in climate action.

€31 million of this additional revenue will be ring fenced for the Just Transition Package and disbursed to the Department of Housing, Property and Local Government, the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment as detailed in the following below:

	€	Just Transition Package
Aggregated Housing Upgrade Scheme	€20 million	Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government
Peatlands Rehabilitation	€ 5 million	Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
Just Transition Fund	€ 6 million	Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment

Managing the delivery of the just transition package is the responsibility of the Departments listed above.

Brexit Issues

92. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he expects measures taken to date to adequately deal with issues arising from Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46873/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Since the result of the UK referendum in 2016, Brexit has been embedded in all of the Government's economic decision-making, and in the management of our economy. At all times the Government has sought to protect our citizens and support the economy, enterprise and jobs. Budget 2020 builds on the preparations that have been underway across Government since the UK referendum in 2016, including:

- dedicated measures announced in Budgets 2017, 2018 and 2019;

- two comprehensive Contingency Action Plans;

- enhanced physical capacity at our ports and airports;

- training and financial supports to increase our customs capacity; and

- appointment of additional staff in key areas.

In addition, up to €600 million has been made available through the Future Growth Loan Scheme and Brexit Loan Scheme. This is already helping our businesses to mitigate the risks of Brexit.

Budget 2020, including the macroeconomic and fiscal outlook which underpins it, was based on the prudent assumption that the UK would leave the EU without an agreement. The Budget set out a number of temporary, targeted support measures that could be triggered to ensure that that our economy will be protected insofar as possible from the risks of a no deal Brexit. This is prudent budgetary management. Assuming a no-deal Brexit ensures that the Government will have the necessary resources at its disposal to address this challenge, whilst preserving the longer-term sustainability of the public finances and safeguarding the hard won progress of recent years in stabilising the public finances.

The Government's focus is to protect our economy and to minimise disruption to the greatest extent possible. The best way we can mitigate against the risks posed by Brexit is through prudent budgetary policy, careful management of the public finances and by focusing on competitiveness-oriented policies. The Government will continue to work to strengthen the resilience of the economy, to maximise opportunities and to prepare for the challenges of Brexit.

Currency Exchange

93. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if, in the aftermath of Brexit, he remains satisfied that Ireland is adequately protected in the event of currency fluctuations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46874/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Budget 2020, including the macroeconomic outlook which underpins it, was based on the prudent assumption that the UK would leave the EU on 31 October without an agreement. The macroeconomic outlook is set out in the Economic and Fiscal Outlook published with Budget 2020. The euro-sterling exchange rate assumptions underlying Budget 2020, based on exchange rate outturns as of mid-September 2020 and unchanged thereafter, are set out in Table 1:

Table 1: Euro-sterling exchange rate assumptions underlying Budget 2020

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Euro-sterling exchange rate (€1=)	0.88	0.89	0.90	0.90	0.90	0.90	0.90

Source: Budget 2020 Economic and Fiscal Outlook

In the event of a disorderly Brexit, the Government will provide financial support to the economy, in the first instance through higher unemployment-related spending. The Government will also provide timely targeted support to viable firms and enterprises. This will build on existing supports, and will be designed to address transitional issues such as cash-flow problems and market diversification.

As we cannot control the international environment or exchange rate developments, it is crucially important that continued competitiveness improvements are achieved, including by focusing on costs we can control and by boosting our productivity. Ensuring a sustainable path for the public finances is also of fundamental importance.

The Government's trade strategy - Ireland Connected - sets out a number of measures specifically addressing Brexit-related issues, including diversification of markets for indigenous exporters.

In addition, recent budgets have introduced specific initiatives, such as loan supports for agri-businesses, aimed at supporting those businesses most affected by Brexit. The Brexit Loan Scheme assists firms to adapt and innovate in response to Brexit, to restructure their cost bases and give them the opportunity to diversify into other markets thereby reducing their exposure to the UK. The Future Growth Loan Scheme provides a longer-term facility of up to €300m to support strategic capital investment for a post-Brexit environment by business at competitive rates.

Eurozone Issues

94. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which he remains satisfied regarding the stability of eurozone countries; if this is likely to be affected by currency trading changes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46875/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As Minister for Finance, I attend the Economic and Financial Affairs Council of the European Union (ECOFIN) which is responsible for EU policy in a number of areas including economic policy. I also attend meetings of the Eurogroup, where the Ministers of the Euro Area Member States discuss matters concerning their shared responsibilities related to the euro.

At both the ECOFIN and Eurogroup meetings, Ministers work alongside the European Commission and the European Central Bank (ECB) to take stock of the latest economic situation, including the risks to the European economy's growth prospects.

I regularly monitor the latest economic developments. My Department continually analyses and prepares briefing on short and medium-term macroeconomic trends in European and international economy. This includes informing me of the latest forecasts of the global economy and of our key trading partners from the international institutions.

The Commission published its Autumn Economic Forecast on Thursday 7th November. The forecast indicated that the European and the Euro Area economies have weakened over the past year, reflecting a considerable slowdown in external demand and contraction in the manufacturing sector. While the Euro Area is now in its seventh consecutive year of growth, with growth expected to continue in all Member States, this is at a considerably slower rate than earlier in the decade. European labour markets have remained strong and the unemployment rate has fallen to below its pre-crisis level, fuelling robust wage growth, allowing domestic demand to expand at a relatively steady pace. The labour market is expected to maintain this performance albeit at a slower pace reflecting the broader economy.

The European economy is expected to enter a protracted period of subdued growth and low inflation. The Commission is forecasting Euro Area GDP to expand by 1.1 per cent in 2019 and by 1.2 per cent in 2020 and 2021. The GDP forecast for the EU28 is for growth of 1.4 per cent in 2019 and 2020. This represents a significant slowdown from the growth rates seen in 2015-2017. The performance of individual Member States is diverging with some areas (e.g. Central and Eastern Europe, Malta, and Ireland) expanding faster than others (e.g. Italy, Germany).

The Commission also identified a number of risks to future growth in its forecast, including; a less supportive external environment, persisting tension in the international trade environment, a slowdown in Euro Area manufacturing, and uncertainty related to Brexit.

Member states promote stability and growth in their respective economies during the European Semester Cycle. The purpose of the cycle, commencing in November, is to provide a framework for coordination of economic policies and guidelines, delivered in the context of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) and Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure. In Spring/Summer the Commission makes country specific recommendations based on EU member state plans for macroeconomic, budgetary, and structural reforms. The recommendations are designed to put in place, and maintain, the necessary conditions for stability, growth, and jobs in all EU partners.

The Commission Forecasts note that monetary policy conditions are expected to remain supportive and that the Euro Area fiscal stance is set to remain broadly neutral.

In trade terms, almost half of all the trade in goods undertaken by Euro Area countries is with other Euro Area countries, and thus is not subject to currency risk. The nominal values of other key trading partner currencies (as the Euro) are determined by market forces. The Commission forecasts are based on a standard technical assumption of unchanged interest and exchange rates from a given cut-off date. However, the variability of the international environment, including exchange rate developments, underlines the importance of continued competitiveness improvements including by focussing on costs we can control and by boosting our productivity. Ensuring a sustainable path for the public finances is also of fundamental importance.

The adoption of tailored country-specific structural and fiscal reforms will help to boost future growth, increase resilience, and improve future living standards within the Euro Area.

Economic Competitiveness

95. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which the economy will continue to remain competitive notwithstanding Brexit or other international developments, including trade deals or lack of such; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46876/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Strong economic growth is a sign of our economy's competitiveness, with GDP up 6½ percent in year-on-year terms in the first half of this year. Although in the Irish context, GDP can be distorted by globalisation factors, other indicators such as modified domestic demand confirm continued growth in our economy. The strength of the economy is most clearly evident in the labour market. Total employment increased by 63,100 (+2.8 per cent) in the first half of 2019 while the unemployment rate for October fell below 5 per cent for the first time since 2007.

The strength of our economy reflects the important steps we have taken to improve our competitiveness. The 2019 IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook recently ranked Ireland as the 2nd most competitive country in the EU and the 7th most competitive country in the world. In addition, since 2008, the Central Bank's real harmonised competitiveness indicator has improved by approximately 22 per cent.

Importantly, the robust economic growth in recent years has not yet given rise to significant inflationary pressures. In the first ten months of 2019, average annual inflation was just 0.9 per cent. On wage developments, average weekly earnings increased by 3.5 per cent year-on-year in the second quarter of 2019. The rise in household incomes is a welcome development, however it needs to be monitored closely, as a significant acceleration in wages could undermine Ireland's competitiveness relative to other European countries.

Despite recent positive developments, the risks over the coming years are numerous and primarily external in nature. As well as continued uncertainty with respect to Brexit, there is also evidence of a continued slowdown in global growth, as has been recently reported by the IMF and the European Commission.

The Budget 2020 central scenario projections assumed a disorderly Brexit scenario. Under this scenario, GDP growth of just 0.7 per cent would be in prospect next year, reflecting both the impact of a no-deal Brexit and weakness in the global outlook. However, given recent events in the UK and the 'flextension' granted by the EU, a disorderly Brexit in 2020 is less likely, though still possible. Of course, any form of Brexit will have a negative impact on the Irish economy.

The best way we can mitigate against these risks is through prudent budgetary policy, careful management of the public finances and by focusing on competitiveness-oriented policies.

Economic Growth

96. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he anticipates economic growth here to keep pace with other economies throughout Europe and outside in the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46877/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Budget 2020, which was based on the assumption of a no-deal Brexit, projected GDP growth of 5.5 per cent this year and just 0.7 per cent next year, reflecting the Brexit impact and a weakening in the global environment. Growth in modified domestic demand – a better barometer of economic conditions in Ireland – is estimated at 3.2 per cent this year and 1.4 per cent next year.

Indeed as a barometer of how well our economy is performing, there is no story more positive than the one emanating from our labour market. The strong growth in employment over the last number of years has continued into this year, with total employment increasing by 45,000 (+2.0 per cent) in the year to Q2 2019. As a result, there are now 2.3 million people at work in Ireland.

In an EU context, Ireland remains one of the fastest growing Member States. The strong growth and performance seen in our economy is also clearly illustrated by a comparison with the performance of our main trading partners – the Euro Area, the UK and the US.

For the Euro Area the European Commission is forecasting growth of 1.1 per cent this year, and 1.2 per cent next year. The GDP forecast for the EU28 is for growth of 1.4 per cent in 2019 and 2020. This represents a significant slowdown from the growth rates seen in 2015-2017.

The European economy is expected to enter a protracted period of subdued growth and low inflation. GDP should continue to grow in all Member States, albeit at a more moderate pace, in 2020 and 2021. The performance of individual Member States is diverging with some areas (e.g. Central and Eastern Europe, Malta, and Ireland) expanding faster than others (e.g. Italy, Germany).

For the UK, modest GDP growth of 1.3 per cent is expected this year and 1.4 per cent next year, based on a technical assumption of status quo in terms of trading relations between the EU27 and the UK.

Growth in the US economy is forecast to slow as tailwinds from the fiscal stimulus implemented last year fade. Growth is expected to fall from 2.3 per cent in 2019 to 1.8 per cent in 2020.

In common with Ireland, there has been a recovery in employment growth in all our main export markets – though at a more modest pace – with a corresponding reduction in unemployment.

Eurozone Issues

97. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the position of Ireland in respect of debt, current or otherwise, in the context of the eurozone and the rest of Europe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46878/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As set out in the Budget 2020, Economic and Fiscal Outlook document, an important milestone is expected to be achieved this year, namely that the debt-to-GDP ratio is projected at below the 60 per cent threshold set out in the Stability and Growth Pact, for the first time in the post crisis era.

Ireland's position in terms of gross general government consolidated debt is below the average level of gross general government consolidated debt for both the Euro Area and the European Union when measured as a percentage of GDP.

However, modified gross national income (GNI*) is a more accurate measure of repayment capacity in Ireland, as it excludes many of the factors that artificially inflate the level of GDP in Ireland. On this basis, Ireland's gross general government consolidated debt as a percentage of GNI* is above the average level of the gross general government consolidated debt as a percentage of GDP for both the EU 28 and the Euro Area.

My Department has published, for the third year, the Annual Report on Public Debt in Ireland 2019 which highlights that public indebtedness remains very high in Ireland, reaching an estimated 100.2 per cent of GNI* this year. This is a vulnerability that must be addressed and is why reducing public indebtedness remains a key priority for Government.

[Table]

Brexit Issues

98. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which economic initiatives are likely to arise in the event of unforeseen impacts from Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46879/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Since the result of the UK referendum in 2016, Brexit has been embedded in all of the Government's economic decision-making, and in the management of our economy. At all times the Government has sought to protect our citizens and support the economy, enterprise and jobs. Dedicated measures were announced in Budgets 2017, 2018 and 2019 including up to €600 million that has been made available through the Future Growth Loan Scheme and Brexit Loan Scheme. This is already helping our businesses to mitigate the risks of Brexit.

Budget 2020 builds on these preparations. Budget 2020, including the macroeconomic and fiscal outlook which underpins it, was based on the sensible assumption that the UK would leave the EU on 31 October without an agreement. Budget 2020 involves a 'twin-track' approach, namely:

- Funding services and making progress on particular policy areas, and;

- Supporting sectors and regions most exposed to Brexit-related disruption.

In the event of a disorderly exit from the EU by the United Kingdom, certain sectors of our economy would be impacted more severely than others. In particular, indigenous enterprise and agriculture are likely to be the hardest hit, given our close trading relationship with the UK and the expected increase in tariffs.

To mitigate against this, in addition to allowing the public finances to absorb the shock, the Budget set out a number of temporary, targeted support measures of over €1.2 billion that could be triggered to ensure that that our economy will be protected in as far as is possible from the risks of a no deal Brexit. This is on top of existing grants and loans which are already available for business and agriculture, and is in addition to ongoing Government expenditure on Brexit preparedness.

Assuming a no-deal Brexit ensures that the Government will have the necessary resources at its disposal to address this challenge, whilst preserving the longer-term sustainability of the public finances and safeguarding the hard won progress of recent years in stabilising the public finances.

The Government's focus is to protect our economic and financial interests, and to minimise the disruption to the Irish economy to the greatest extent possible. The best way we can mitigate against the risks posed by Brexit is through sensible budgetary policy, careful management of the public finances and by focusing on competitiveness-oriented policies. The Government will continue to work to strengthen the resilience of the economy, to maximise opportunities and to prepare for the challenges of Brexit.

Brexit Issues

99. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which his Department continues to identify and monitor weaknesses in the economy likely to be exploited by other events outside his control in the aftermath of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46881/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): My Department continuously identifies and monitors possible risks to, and weaknesses in, the Irish economy, most of which are currently external in nature.

In the Budget 2020 Economic and Fiscal Outlook, four key external risks were identified. Firstly, there is a possibility that the slowdown in global growth will become more prolonged, despite the initial expectation of the slowdown being temporary. Secondly, continued and increasing geopolitical uncertainty has the potential to disrupt growth in key regions and generate headwinds for output and employment in Ireland.

Thirdly, an increase in protectionism, including increased tariffs on EU-US trade, could have a detrimental impact on living standards. Given Ireland's position as a small open economy with a high degree of integration in global value chains, any further disruption to trade or a slowdown in global growth would have a disproportionate impact on the Irish economy.

The fourth external risk identified is the potential for the outcome of Brexit to be more severe than initially estimated, notwithstanding the assumption of a no-deal Brexit in the baseline forecasts. On the other hand, there is the increasing possibility of the UK leaving the EU with a withdrawal agreement which represents an upside risk.

A useful tool used by my Department to monitor global developments is the economic policy uncertainty index. The global index and the Ireland-specific index are currently at all-time highs, reflecting the challenges currently faced by the global and Irish economies.

As these external challenges are largely beyond our control, the best way we can mitigate against them is through prudent budgetary policy, careful management of the public finances and by focusing on competitiveness-oriented policies. That is what this Government has done and will continue to do.

NAMA Operations

100. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if a land-locked site (details supplied) will be examined by NAMA with a view to enabling the necessary details and procedures to be progressed in order to facilitate housing development; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46882/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Deputy will be aware that I, as Minister for Finance, have no role in respect of NAMA's operations and decisions, or in properties securing its loans.

However, as previously outllined in a response on 3rd October 2019, in this instance, I am advised by NAMA that it has never had involvement with the referenced site.

Mortgage Interest Rates

101. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the discussions he has had with the Central Bank and-or the European Central Bank with a view to bringing mortgage interest rates here in line with the European norm; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46883/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The European Central Bank (ECB) sets monetary policy and official interest rates for the Eurozone as a whole and also plays a key role in the prudential supervision of European banks and the maintenance of the stability of the overall banking system in the context of the Single Supervisory Mechanism. It is a matter for each credit institution to set its own lending and deposit rates having regard to cost and competitive considerations and also to make its own lending decisions. Neither I nor the Central Bank have a role in prescribing the interest rates that commercial lenders may charge on their loans, including mortgages, or for deposits.

Part of the reason for the differential between Irish mortgage rates and those in other countries is the relatively large historical loss experience in the Irish market during the financial crisis and the related legacy issues of non-performing loans, many of which remain on banks' book. Banks are required to make adequate provisions for such loans.

Banks are also required to hold an adequate level of capital against mortgage lending. These capital requirements are calculated with reference to historical loss and default rates with the result that Irish banks are required to hold relatively more capital for new mortgage lending than many of their European peers, in some cases substantially more capital.

In addition to their capital requirements, banks are also required to build up additional capital to meet regulatory capital buffers such as the countercyclical capital buffer which is intended to ensure banks can withstand future adverse economic shocks.

The impact of these capital requirements is reflected in the interest rates charged for mortgages in Ireland.

Furthermore, the Irish banking system continues to hold a large amount of lower yielding tracker mortgages on their balance sheets and there is currently a high level of concentration in the market for new mortgage credit.

The Central Bank has introduced a number of changes to the Consumer Protection Code that are designed to help consumers make savings on their mortgage repayments; for example, provision 6.5 (g) of the Code now requires lenders at least annually to, inter alia, notify their variable interest (other than tracker) mortgage customers whether they can move to a cheaper interest rate as a result of a change in their loan to value interest rate band and, if the customer is permitted to move, to invite the borrower to contact the lender to discuss the matter. If the consumer is not permitted to move to a lower loan to value band with a lower interest rate, the consumer is nevertheless to be notified that he/she may be able to avail of a lower loan to value interest rate band from another lender based on an up to-date valuation of the property. It should also be noted that the Central Bank macro prudential loan to value and loan to income residential mortgage lending restrictions do not apply to switcher mortgages. More generally, the Code also requires lenders at least annually to provide to variable rate (excluding tracker) mortgage holders:-

- a summary of other mortgage products offered by that lender which could provide savings for the consumer at that point in time,

- a statement that consumers should keep their mortgage arrangements under review as there may be other options that could provide savings for the borrower and

- a link to the relevant section of the Competition and Consumer Protection website relating to mortgage switching or changing mortgage type.

(https://www.ccpc.ie/consumers/financial-comparisons/mortgage-comparisons/).

Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears

102. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which he has monitored the activities of investment funds and other lending institutions in their pursuit of borrowers; if due process and best practice is observed and dealt with as necessary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46884/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Deputy, in advance of my reply, I am assuming that your use of the words “investment funds” is a reference to those firms in the non-bank sector i.e. retail credit and credit servicing firms.

It is within the remit of the Central Bank of Ireland’s (the Central Bank) responsibilities to safeguard stability and protect consumers, and its approach to mortgage arrears resolution is focused on ensuring the fair treatment of borrowers through a strong consumer protection framework and ensuring that regulated entities have appropriate arrears resolution strategies and operations in place.

The Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears (CCMA) is a statutory code that must be complied with by relevant regulated entities as a matter of law. The CCMA provides a strong consumer protection framework, aimed specifically at the process to be followed by relevant firms, to ensure borrowers in arrears or pre-arrears in respect of a mortgage loan secured on a primary residence are treated in a timely, transparent and fair manner.

Banks, retail credit firms and credit servicing firms are all required to comply with the CCMA. The overriding objective of the CCMA is to ensure the fair and transparent treatment of consumers in mortgage arrears or pre-arrears, and that due regard is had to the fact that each case of mortgage arrears is unique and needs to be considered on its own merits. The CCMA recognises that it is in the interests of borrowers and regulated firms to address financial difficulties as speedily, effectively and sympathetically as circumstances allow. It sets out the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Process (MARP), a four-step process that regulated entities must follow:

Step 1: Communicate with borrower;

Step 2: Gather financial information;

Step 3: Assess the borrower's circumstances; and

Step 4: Propose a resolution

The arrears handling provisions in Chapter 8 of the Consumer Protection Code (the Code) apply when the loan is not a mortgage loan to which the CCMA applies. Amongst other protections, the Code requires that where an account is in arrears, a regulated entity must seek to agree an approach that will assist the personal consumer in resolving the arrears.

Most loan agreements include a clause that allows the original lender to sell the loan on to another firm. When a loan is sold, the relevant Irish and EU consumer protections continue to apply. Under the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act 2018, which came into effect on 21 January 2019, if a loan is transferred, the holder of the legal title to the credit must now be authorised by the Central Bank as a credit servicing firm. Such credit servicing firms must act in accordance with Irish financial services law that applies to 'regulated financial service providers'. This ensures that consumers, whose loans are sold to another firm, maintain the same regulatory protections that they had prior to the sale, including under the various statutory Codes of Conduct issued by the Central Bank, such as the Code and the CCMA.

The Central Bank carries out its supervision of regulated entities, including banks, retail credit and credit servicing firms in a number of ways, which includes both desk based and on-site reviews of various activities. In early 2018, I requested the Central Bank to review the CCMA to ensure it remains as effective as possible in the context of the sale of loans by regulated lenders. In November 2018, the Central Bank published a report on this matter.

The review concluded that the CCMA is effective and working as intended in the context of the sale of loans, for borrowers who engage with the process. There was no evidence that retail credit and credit servicing firms do not engage with borrowers in arrears. When a loan is sold by a bank, any existing Alternative Repayment Arrangements (ARAs) in place with a borrower under the CCMA continue to be honoured until the agreed term of the ARA ends. There was no evidence that borrowers, whose circumstances have not changed, were being moved off existing ARAs by retail credit and credit servicing firms during the term of the ARA. There was no material difference in the level of repossessions by retail credit and credit servicing firms compared to banks.

As a follow-up action to the Report on the CCMA, the Central Bank wrote to banks, retail credit and credit servicing firms in August 2019 to set out its expectations of all firms in respect of loan sales. These expectations include that:

- Sufficient due diligence and information sharing takes place at the outset to ensure that complete customer files transfer as part of a loan sale.

- Where a cooperating borrower is complying with the terms of an ARA and their loan is sold, the new regulated entity cannot unilaterally change the ARA.

- The new regulated entity should continue to honour an ARA until review, expiry or by agreement, as appropriate. This includes honouring timelines and terms and conditions for reviews of the ARA.

- Where the borrower's circumstances have changed, any change to the ARA must be appropriate, sustainable and proportionate to that borrower's circumstances.

Price Inflation

103. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which his Department continues to monitor specific inflationary tendencies within the economy, including inflated rental prices; his plans to address such issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46885/19]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Irish inflation has been subdued for a number of years. For example, on a Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP) basis, annual inflation has been below 1 per cent since 2013. This trend is unlikely to change this year with HICP inflation of 0.9 per cent on average for the first ten months of 2019. This phenomenon is not restricted to Ireland. In recent years, low inflation has been a feature across all advanced economies.

Irish inflation has been consistently below euro area inflation since 2008. The divergence between inflation in the euro area and Ireland can in part be attributed to the impact of euro-sterling appreciation on consumer prices in Ireland. In turn this reflects the importance of the UK as a source of imports of consumer products.

While overall inflation has been subdued, services inflation has been robust, averaging 2.4 per cent on average for the first nine months of the year. A key component which explains part of the increase in services inflation is the strong growth in rent prices. Rent inflation averaged 6.4 per cent last year, a slight moderation from the 6.7 per cent increase in 2017. This decline in rent inflation has continued into 2019 with rent inflation of 5.5 per cent on average for the nine months of 2019. The high level of rent prices partially reflects the shortage of housing at present, a key concern of Government.

The Government's strategy for tackling housing issues is set out in Rebuilding Ireland – An Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness. The primary objective of the plan is to increase overall housing supply to a more sustainable level of around 25,000 homes per year by 2020. The Government has committed to spending over €6 billion out to 2021 to implement the plan.

Flood Relief Schemes Status

104. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of a flood relief scheme in Ballinhassig, County Cork; the funding committed; the next steps in the process; the timeline for the completion of the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46726/19]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): A Feasibility Study for a Flood Relief Scheme to address the flooding issues in Ballinhassig has been completed by the Office of Public Works (OPW), and has identified a preferred, viable option for the area.

While an Environmental Constraints Study - conducted by independent consultants - recommended that a Stage 1 Environmental Impact Assessment Report and Appropriate Assessment screening process be undertaken for the proposed scheme, these assessments have concluded that the option, as currently proposed, does not require either an Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) or Natura Impact Statement (NIS). It has been determined, therefore, that the scheme can be progressed under Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001-2015. Further surveys are currently being finalised to inform the environmental impacts of the scheme, after which the project will progress to planning and detailed design.

Discussions are currently ongoing with Cork County Council regarding the progression of the scheme through these next stages. While it is not possible to provide a timeframe for the project at this time, provision has been made in OPW's multi annual financial profiles for the progression of the scheme to implementation.

Ministerial Allowances

105. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to abolish the practice of enhanced mileage rates applying to Ministers who have cars with higher engine capacity in view of the commitment to action on climate change. [46804/19]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The arrangements for paying mileage allowances to Ministers of State were introduced, following a government decision in 1983, to reduce the cost of providing Ministerial transport. This was achieved by allowing Ministers of State to use their own cars for official purposes and to employ civilian drivers instead of being supplied with 'State Cars' and Garda drivers. In 2011, this measure was further extended and it was decided that:

a) The President, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Justice and Law Reform should continue to be provided with Garda transport and drivers, for security reasons in line with the recommendations of the Garda Commissioner:

b) The Chief Justice, by virtue of his position, should also have a Garda car and driver;

c) The Director of Public Prosecutions should be provided with Garda transport and protection commensurate with his security profile but this should not be an ex officio entitlement;

d) With the exception of the four members of the Government mentioned in subparagraph a) the arrangements currently in place for Ministers of State should apply for all Ministers, the Attorney General and the Ceann Comhairle.

At the time of the original decision, it was considered that for security purposes and to facilitate the very heavy travelling requirements associated with their office, it was essential for Ministers of State to be allowed to use larger cars. These conditions are reflected in the allocation of a rate for an engine capacity of 2001cc and over for Ministers of State. Since 2011 the same arrangements apply to Ministers.

In the context of the Climate Action Plan it is intended to review rates for electric vehicles with a view to introducing civil service mileage rates for electric vehicles reflecting the costs incurred by drivers using their own vehicles for work on behalf of the State. In addition, the next periodic review of civil service mileage rates is scheduled to take place in 2020 and all relevant factors will be taken into account in the context of this review.

Public Sector Staff

106. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of times consent has been sought and-or given under the terms of circular 109/247/7417 of 17 October 2011 for public servants to undertake paid work, in addition to their own salary, in each of the years 2012 to 2018 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46830/19]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): My officials have reviewed records held in my Department and I can confirm no records have been found of requests seeking sanction for public servants to undertake paid work, in addition to their own salary, in each of the years 2012 to 2018.

The Deputy may wish to be aware that in a number of cases, third level institutions were recompensed by various public service bodies for the time given up by an academic staff member while sitting on a State board. In such cases, the college was compensated and not the individual.

Public Sector Staff Redeployment

107. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the steps he is taking to facilitate more civil servants who wish to locate out of Dublin to other locations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46840/19]

108. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the steps he is taking to encourage greater mobility within the wider public service; the progress made in 2018 and to date in 2019 to achieve same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46841/19]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 107 and 108 together.

As the Deputy is aware, the Civil Service Mobility scheme which comes under the remit of my Department, and is administered through HR Shared Services, National Shared Services Office, offers an opportunity for staff members to apply for mobility through an open and transparent system. The establishment of the scheme fulfils one of the requirements of Action 15 of the Civil Service Renewal Plan; and Action 14 of the People Strategy for the Civil Service.

The scheme is being introduced on a phased basis. Phase 1 of the scheme went live in 2018 and 2019. This phase is for the general Civil Service grades of Clerical Officer (CO) and Executive Officer (EO) to apply for mobility between and within 46 zones. The location choices for the scheme are based on mobility zones (46 zones) rather than by county or province.

There has been a high level of interest in the scheme with c.4,700 staff members (24% of the total participating grades) applying for a move through the scheme with:

- the majority of applicants c.2,860 applying for a move either within a regional zone or between regional zones;

- c.1,040 of the applicants applying to move from Zone 46 (Dublin) to a regional location – representing 12% of the staff in the participating grades in Zone 46;

c.800 staff based in Zone 46 applying for Mobility within the same Zone.

Over 350 moves have taken place since the scheme went live with other moves currently in progress.

Plans are in place to extend the scheme in 2020 to include the grades of Higher Executive Officer, Administrative Officer and Assistant Principal. When this process is complete, mobility will be in place for general Civil Service grades from Clerical Officer up to Principal Officer.

The scheme provides for cross organisational moves within a location that were not previously possible under the former transfer mechanisms that it has replaced. This means that staff members are given opportunities to work closer to home and also to further their career development. The mobility of experienced staff members across the system also supports the business needs of Civil Service organisations.

To date, it should be noted that approximately 75% of the applicants have initially declined an offer to move to a zone that they selected as their preferred location. This would suggest that the actual number of staff members who would move from Dublin to other zones is lower than the number of current applicants [c.1,040]. We will continue to monitor this trend.

Following the full roll out of the Civil Service Mobility Scheme, it is the intention to review and extend mobility over time to provide additional development opportunities and enable greater mobility across the Public Service.

EU Programmes

109. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his attention has been drawn to the issues involving the INTERREG 111a Programme 2000-2006, priority 2, measure 3: renewable energy and an application by a company (details supplied); if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the Belgian public prosecutor has opened a file regarding allegations of fraud against the programme; and if he will consider registering an interest in the investigation with a view to assist if necessary. [46886/19]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy is aware, the INTERREG IIIA programme (2000-2006) was an EU co-funded cross-border cooperation programme between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The company in question proposed a project for funding under Priority 2 Measure 3 of the INTERREG IIIA Programme in April 2003. I understand that the project proposal was subsequently appraised and an offer of funding was made, subject to certain conditions.

However, the company in question did not accept the offer of funding, and the project did not proceed under the INTERREG IIIA Programme.

School Accommodation Provision

110. **Deputy Catherine Martin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to arrange for the provision of crèche facilities on the site for a new primary and post-primary school (details supplied) alongside the schools in view of the need in the area for childcare places; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46728/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department's responsibility is to provide sufficient accommodation to meet 20,000 new and replacement school places each year to ensure that every child has a school place. I wish to advise the Deputy that the site in question has been acquired for school purposes. My Department does not have any remit for the provision of accommodation for crèche facilities.

International Relations

111. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to strengthen educational ties between Canada and Ireland; the efforts being made in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46740/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Canada is a growing market for Ireland's international engagement, with Irish Universities and Institutes of Technology actively engaged in the Canadian market. The relationship between Ireland and Canada is based on collaboration in the fields of student, staff and academic mobility, and Ireland's Higher Education Institutions have developed significant relationships and agreements with several Canadian provinces over the last number of years.

Education in Ireland, who are charged with promoting and building international educational relationships on our behalf, is planning various events to strengthen the educational ties between Ireland and Canada in 2020, most notably a trade mission to Vancouver, an inward visit of colleges from British Columbia to develop new and enhance existing partnerships, and an online campaign to build brand awareness in the provinces of British Columbia and Ontario.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

112. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the average student teacher ratio at primary level. [46745/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As per the key statistics report for 2018/19 the pupil/teacher ratio for primary level in 2018/19 is 15.2.

Please find a link to the report below:

www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/key-statistics-2018-2019.pdf.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

113. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the average student teacher ratio at post-primary level. [46746/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As per the key statistics report for 2018/19 the pupil/teacher ratio for post-primary level in 2018/19 is 13.

Please find a link to the report below:

www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/key-statistics-2018-2019.pdf.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

114. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the average student teacher ratio at primary level for non-DEIS schools. [46747/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Pupil-Teacher Ratio at primary level for non-DEIS schools for 2018/19 is 16.1.

The PTR at primary level for DEIS and non-DEIS schools does not include 233 visiting teacher and part time special education posts.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

115. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the average student teacher ratio at post-primary level in non-DEIS schools. [46748/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Pupil-Teacher Ratio at post primary level, excluding vocational schools managed by Education and Training Boards, for non-DEIS schools for 2018/19 is 13.8.

This ratio only includes secondary and community & comprehensive schools as we do not have the number of teaching posts by individual vocational schools.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

116. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the average student teacher ratio at primary level in DEIS schools. [46749/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Pupil-Teacher Ratio at primary level for DEIS schools for 2018/19 is 12.6.

The PTR at primary level for DEIS and non-DEIS schools does not include 233 visiting teacher and part time special education posts.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

117. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the average student teacher ratio at post-primary level in DEIS schools. [46750/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Pupil-Teacher Ratio at post primary level, excluding vocational schools managed by Education and Training Boards, for DEIS schools for 2018/19 is 10.5.

This ratio only includes secondary and community & comprehensive schools as we do not have the number of teaching posts by individual vocational schools.

DEIS Expenditure

118. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of designating ten, 20, 30, 40 and 50 schools as DEIS band 2, in tabular form. [46751/19]

119. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of designating ten, 20, 30, 40 and 50 schools as DEIS band 1, in tabular form. [46752/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 118 and 119 together.

In 2019 my Department will spend in the region of €125 million on the 891 schools participating in the programme. Further expenditure is incurred by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection on the School Meals Programme and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on the School Completion Programme. The full list of supports available to DEIS schools is available on my Department's website at the following link www.education.

ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/deis-supports-to-deis-schools-effective-from-2017-2018-school-year.pdf.

It is not possible to definitively provide the total cost of designating a further group of schools as Band 1 or Band 2 as the costs will vary from school to school depending on enrolment and the levels of disadvantage in individual schools.

In the 2019/20 school year, the spend on DEIS is spread across 891 schools participating in the DEIS Programme. The composition is as follows:

Primary Urban Band 1 - 231

Primary Urban Band 2 - 104

Primary Rural - 358

Post Primary - 198

DEIS Expenditure

120. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of reopening applications for DEIS band 2 and designating DEIS band 2 existing schools that would meet the criteria at present. [46753/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As the Deputy is aware, following the review of DEIS, my Department introduced an objective, statistics based model for assessing which schools merit inclusion in the DEIS Programme, which does not require schools to go through an application process. All schools at both Primary and Post Primary level are being assessed using the new identification model.

My Department is currently undertaking data analysis in the context of resource allocation to match identified need.. This analysis is being carried out by members of the DEIS Technical Group which contains representatives of the Department's Statistics and Social Inclusion Units, the Inspectorate and the Educational Research Centre. Work is ongoing by this group and significant progress has been made. I am confident that the culmination of this analysis will facilitate the ultimate aim of matching resources to identified need and will allow us to target extra resources at those schools most in need. Until this analysis is complete, it is not intended to extend the DEIS programme to any further schools. It is also not possible to estimate associated costs until this process is complete as costs depend on the levels of disadvantage and enrolments in individual schools and the level of resources to be provided.

Student Grant Scheme Eligibility

121. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if an audit will be conducted from 2016 to date on the number of third-level students that have been denied a full SUSI grant due to their part-time employment earnings exceeding the €4,500 threshold; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46758/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The assessment of means under my Department's student grant scheme is based on gross income from all sources, with certain social welfare and health service executive payments being exempt.

In the assessment of means, a deduction can be made for holiday earnings made by the applicant from employment outside of term time but within the reference period. The value of this income disregard was increased from €3,809 to €4,500 in the 2016 scheme.

The student grant scheme contains a number of qualifying thresholds for various grant values. These gradations allow students just over a threshold margin, to remain in receipt of a grant, albeit at a reduced rate that reflects their relative income vis-à-vis other applicants. There are no plans to conduct an audit of the holiday earnings criterion which forms part of the overall means testing criteria.

Students in third-level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Information on the fund is available through the Access Officer in the third level institution attended. This fund is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis.

School Staff

122. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if teacher allocations to small rural schools will be reviewed in view of the fact that some rural schools lost a class teacher due to the fact they were just one or two pupils short of the figure required to retain a class teacher; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46759/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): 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.

I understand the importance of small schools and I hosted a Small Schools Symposium in June attended by the relevant Education Partners to discuss issues of concern to small schools. Securing the future of small schools is a priority for me as Minister for Education and Skills.

Budget 2020 has provided for improved teacher staffing levels for small schools. This measure will see a more favourable pupil teacher ratio in small schools from September 2020. This improved schedule will apply in two, three and four teacher schools and ensure one less pupil is required to retain/recruit a teacher.

This builds on measures in previous budgets which has seen improvements in the appointment and retention thresholds for the 2nd, 3rd and 4th classroom teacher and more favourable enrolment thresholds for one teacher schools situated 8km or more from the nearest school of the same type of patronage and/or language of instruction.

Small schools have also benefitted from the 1 point improvement to the primary staffing schedule for all schools implemented in 2016 and again in 2018. The staffing schedule at primary level currently operates on a general average of 26 pupils to every 1 teacher which is historically the lowest ever allocation ratio at primary level.

In addition, the staffing process includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria, including a specific appeal measure for small schools, to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board.

Teacher Recruitment

123. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the actions he is continuing to pursue in order to address the issue regarding ongoing difficulties in recruiting teachers at primary and second-level schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46760/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Management bodies and schools have, in recent years, reported difficulties in recruiting teachers. At primary level this relates mainly to the recruitment of substitute teachers and at post-primary level to the recruitment of teachers of particular subjects (STEM, modern foreign languages, Irish and Home Economics, in particular).

The Steering Group on Teacher Supply, chaired by the Secretary General of my Department, is overseeing the implementation of the Teacher Supply Action Plan, which I launched in November 2018.

Some of the actions in the plan include:

- My Department launched the "Teaching Transforms" campaign (digital, radio and video) to promote the teaching profession, supported by a new dedicated webpage.

- Following engagement with the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the higher education institutions (HEIs) have put in place new initial teacher education (ITE) undergraduate programmes in 2019 in a number of priority subject areas, including mathematics, modern foreign languages and Irish. More new undergraduate ITE programmes are also planned to commence in 2020.

- The HEA is engaging with the HEIs to explore the development of programmes to upskill existing teachers in targeted post primary subject areas.

- The Teaching Council has reviewed the implementation of student teacher school placement guidelines and a report on this is expected before the end of 2019.

- Stakeholder consultative forums and focus groups for teachers, principals, parents, student teachers and school students have been held with further forums and focus groups planned over the coming school year.

- An online teacher recruitment portal to match available teachers with short term substitute vacancies in primary and post primary schools is being developed. It is intended that this portal will be operational in the near future.

- Substitute teacher supply panels for primary schools are operating on a pilot basis for 2019/20 in 6 locations that have been identified as having a significant challenge in recruiting substitute teachers (two panels in Dublin and one each in Kildare, Meath, Cork and Galway).

- My Department published Circular 0015/2019 with details of a new teacher sharing scheme for post-primary schools. The scheme is intended to enhance curricular choice in schools and support young teachers in obtaining full time employment.

The Steering Group continue to meet on a regular basis and I hope to make further announcements in the near future.

School Accommodation

124. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the building of a new national school in Ferbane, County Offaly, can be progressed in view of the fact it is operating on two different sites; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46761/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can confirm that an application for major capital works, for the school referred to by the Deputy, has been received in my Department.

As the Deputy is aware, under the National Development Plan (NDP), increased funding has been provided for the school sector capital investment programme. This funding allows for a continued focus on the provision of new permanent school places to keep pace with demographic demand and also provides for an additional focus on the refurbishment of existing school buildings, starting in the second half of the Project Ireland 2040 period. At this time, it is not possible to progress an application for major capital works for the school as Ferbane has not been identified as an area of demographic growth.

However, it is open to the school to submit an application for my Department's consideration under the Additional School Accommodation (ASA) Scheme, where the school authority deems there to be a deficit of essential accommodation. The application form can be accessed on the Department's website www.education.ie.

Schools Building Projects Status

125. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the construction of a new school (details supplied); and the expected date for its completion. [46762/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The delivery of this school building project has been devolved by the Department to the local Education and Training Board (ETB).

The Service Level Agreement between my Department and the ETB has been signed and sealed.

It is now a matter for the ETB to procure a Design Team for the project to design the buildings, obtain the necessary statutory planning permissions, and move the project onward to construction in due course.

As the project is at an early stage in the delivery process, it is not possible at this time to give a date for the completion.

School Funding

126. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if funding will be provided to replace a dangerous outdoor play area surface in a school (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46776/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can inform the Deputy that my Department has not received an application for funding in respect of the project details to which he refers.

I can also inform him that the Summer Works Scheme (SWS) is designed to allow schools, on a devolved funding basis, to carry out necessary improvement and refurbishment works that will upgrade existing school facilities including the upgrading of outdoor play areas. It is the appropriate scheme for funding requests of this nature.

It was open to the school to in question to make an application under the Summer Works Scheme (SWS) 2020 for the works described. However, I understand that no such application was made.

Special Educational Needs

127. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if funding will be allocated to provide MAPA training for staff at a school (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46789/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) provides a range of supports to teachers, parents and students in the area of special educational needs. This includes continuing professional development (CPD) for school principals and teachers, in-school support and advice on evidence informed interventions and information for parents and guardians of children with special educational needs.

Current training available to teaching staff in the area of Special Educational Needs includes School Based Seminars including NCSE designed and delivered Seminars; NCSE Supported Courses such as Post-Graduate Certificate/Diploma Programme of Continuing Professional Development in Special Educational Needs (Autistic Spectrum Disorders) for Teachers; On-line Courses and e-Learning; NCSE Book Borrowing and College and University Post Graduate Courses in Applied Behavioural Analysis, Deaf/Hard of Hearing and Visual Impairment. The Support Service continues to update current CPD courses and design new CPD courses in response to the needs of schools and teachers.

The Inclusion Support Service also provides school visits, phone support and email support.

As the funding request referred to by the Deputy relates to a particular training course, I have arranged for the NCSE to provide a direct reply to the Deputy.

School Accommodation Provision

128. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education and Skills further to Parliamentary Question No. 81 of 6 February 2019, his plans to provide additional school accommodation for Meakstown, Dublin 11; if the high number of new residential units built in the area will be taken into account; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46790/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System, using data from a range of sources, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise.

For school planning purposes Meakstown is located in the Finglas East-Ballymun Dublin 11 school planning area. Major new residential developments in a school planning area have the potential to alter demand in that area. In that regard, as part of the demographic exercises, my Department engages with each of the local authorities to obtain the up-to-date information on significant new residential development in each area, including the area to which the Deputy refers.

As the Deputy will be aware, in April 2018, the Government announced plans for the establishment of 42 new schools over the next 4 years (2019 to 2022). This announcement follows nationwide, demographic exercises carried out by my Department into the future need for primary and post-primary schools across the country.

While the announcement did not include a new school for the Finglas East-Ballymun-Dublin 11 school planning area, the requirement for new schools will be kept under on-going review and in particular will have regard for the increased rollout of housing provision as outlined in Project Ireland 2040.

It is open to an individual school to apply for accommodation under the additional accommodation scheme if the school does not have sufficient capacity to meet school places.

Schools Health and Safety

129. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the schemes to which a school (details supplied) should apply in order to acquire a small piece of land to provide a set-down area opposite the school to alleviate the dangerous situation of children being dropped to school on a blind bend; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46791/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to inform the Deputy that acquiring additional land to provide a set down area opposite the school in question is a matter between the landowner and the Patron.

The issue of road safety measures in general outside the area of vested school sites such as road signage, traffic calming measures, car parking and pedestrian facilities are the responsibility in the first instance of the relevant local authority.

School Funding

130. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he has received correspondence and-or an application for capital funding for a hall for a national school (details supplied); his plans to contribute to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46794/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that an application for a sports hall has been received from the school authority in question.

As you are aware the National Development Plan (NDP) provides for an €8.4 billion investment in school buildings over the period 2018 to 2027 to deliver on NDP and National Planning Framework objectives through addressing the twin priorities of catering for demographics and ensuring a strengthened focus on refurbishment of existing school stock. The announcement referred to the commitment to a PE hall build and modernisation programme in post primary schools, starting in the second half of the project Ireland 2040 period.

The immediate priority is to provide 20,000 new and replacement school places each year, to ensure that every child has a school place. My Department is not in a position, at this point, to consider the request from Glynn National School for a Sports Hall. The school have been informed of this decision. The request will however be retained on file for future consideration.

School Accommodation Provision

131. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if there is a policy to contribute to schools that have fundraised for small capital projects within their schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46795/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that schools which identify that they have a shortfall in accommodation that they may apply for funding under my Department's Additional School Accommodation Scheme (ASA). The application form and information relating to this scheme are available on my Department's website www.education.ie.

If the project required by schools is smaller in nature then they may wish to consider the Summer Works Scheme (SWS). This scheme is designed to allow schools, on a devolved funding basis, to carry out necessary improvement and refurbishment works that will upgrade existing school facilities. Information relating to this scheme is available on my Department's website www.education.ie.

Alternatively, if health and safety works are identified that require immediate attention, an Emergency Works application for these works only can be submitted to my Department. The Emergency Works circular and application form are available on my Department's website www.education.gov.ie.

If schools qualify for grant-aid under any of my Department's schemes funding is provided in full.

School Accommodation Provision

132. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the capital plans for a national school (details supplied) in County Wexford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46796/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department approved capital funding to Glynn N.S. for additional accommodation. My Department advised the school authority that it is not in a position to provide funding to the school for a General Purpose room due to the necessity to prioritise funding for essential classroom accommodation to meet demographic need.

You will be aware that under the National Development Plan (NDP) increased funding has been provided for the school sector capital investment scheme. This funding allows for a continued focus on the provision of new permanent school places to keep pace with demographic demand and also provides for an additional focus on the refurbishment of existing school buildings to include the building and modernisation of PE facilities in schools.

Under the Ireland Project 2040, we will invest €8.4 billion (compared to €4.9 billion in the previous decade) in primary and post primary school buildings. This will include the provision of 50 large scale school building projects and 20,000 school places in state of the art new buildings.

The immediate priority of my Department is providing 20,000 new and replacement school places each year, to ensure that every child has a school place. The school's request will however be retained on file for consideration in the event of funding becoming available in the future.

Schools Health and Safety

133. **Deputy Shane Cassells** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he has liaised with a school (details supplied) in County Meath regarding improving road safety for students and staff in the vicinity of the school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46798/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): In general, individual school authorities are responsible, in the first instance, for ensuring the safety and welfare of children and others in their care.

The issue of road safety measures in the road network outside the area of vested school sites such as road signage, traffic calming measures, car parking and pedestrian facilities are the responsibility in the first instance of the relevant local authority. Local Authorities have the power to decide on road safety measures outside schools to ensure that measures are in place to protect the safety of local school children. My Department has no function in this matter.

I can confirm to the Deputy than an application for External Environment Projects (Category 10) has been received from the school authority, in question, under my Department's multi-annual Summer Works Scheme (SWS) 2020 onwards.

I wish to advise that commensurate with the level of funding available for SWS in 2020, applications will be assessed on a top down basis in accordance with the prioritisation criteria outlined in the governing Circular Letter for the Scheme. This Circular Letter (0027/2019) is available on my Department's website www.education.ie

It is my intention to publish a list of successful applicants in Q4, 2019 for works to be carried out in summer 2020.

Departmental Funding

134. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the funding available to a non-profit centre (details supplied) that wishes to expand to Letterkenny, County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46829/19]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Funding of this nature does not fall within the remit of my Department. I would suggest that the Deputy should speak to my colleague, the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation on this matter.

Immigration Status

135. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if a person (details supplied) can extend their stamp 1G visa or obtain a working permit visa; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46775/19]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that a Stamp 1G permission is intended to allow a non-EEA graduate to seek employment in Ireland following their graduation. This should be for the purpose of seeking graduate level employment and applying for a general employment permit, a critical skills employment permit or research hosting agreement. The details of the revised programme are set out in the policy document on the Third Level Graduate Programme which can be accessed on the website of my Department's Immigration Service - www.inis.ie.

The person referred to may make an application for a further Stamp 1G permission provided they have not exceeded the maximum of allowable period of student permission overall. Graduates with an award at Level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications may be granted a twelve month permission to a maximum of seven years student permission overall. Time spent on a Stamp 2 permission as a student and Stamp 1G under this programme cannot exceed an aggregate time of seven years in total.

Graduates with an award at Level 9 or above on the National Framework of Qualifications qualify for the Programme may be granted permission for twenty-four months to a maximum of eight years student permission overall, time spent on Stamp 2 as a student and on Stamp 1G under this programme cannot exceed an aggregate time of eight years in total.

The issuing of work permits is a matter for the Work Permits Division of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. Information relating to Work Permits can be found on www.dbei.gov.ie or by contacting the Work Permits Section of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. The contact numbers are 01-4175333 or Lo-call: 1890 201 616.

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

Citizenship Applications

136. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when a person (details supplied) will receive a response to their application for citizenship; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46725/19]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): An application for a certificate of naturalisation from the person referred to by the Deputy is currently being considered by my Department. On completion of the necessary processing, the application will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible. Should further documentation be required it will be requested from the applicant in due course.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

I am also aware that the recent judgment of the High Court relating to continuous residency under Section 15(1)(c) of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act, 1956 (as amended) has given cause for concern. The matter remains before the courts, with the Court of Appeal reserving judgement on the appeal on 8th Oct, and the matter therefore remains sub-judice. The outcome of the appeal will have a bearing on whether or not legislation is required. Should it be necessary, I intend to introduce a Bill in the Oireachtas as soon as possible this term.

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

State Properties

137. **Deputy Brendan Ryan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the Thornton Hall lands in County Dublin earmarked previously for a prison; if the lands are still in public ownership; if so, if offers from community groups for temporary use of the land will be considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46731/19]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will appreciate, the Thornton Hall site was purchased in 2005 with the intention of constructing a large scale prison campus to replace the 19th century complex at Mountjoy Prison. Due to the downturn in the economy, the scale of the project could not be accommodated within the capital allocation available and the project did not proceed. In the decade since the original plan, international research has tended to favour smaller prisons within reach of support communities as the best option for rehabilitation. In addition, in light of the decision not to proceed with Thornton Hall, significant capital investment was made at the Mountjoy campus over recent years to upgrade accommodation.

Thornton Hall site remains in State ownership.

I understand from the Irish Prison Service that no requests for the temporary use of the site by community groups have been received by the IPS to date.

In recent years a working group, which included representatives from the OPW, considered future use options for the site. This included discussions with Fingal County Council. The site has also been flagged to the Department of Housing and Local Government, and to the Land Development Agency. As such, proposals for the site will be considered both in the context of broader State requirements for land assets as well as any future requirements in relation to detention of prisoners.

Naturalisation Certificates

138. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of certificates of naturalisation that have been granted to citizens of the United States of America and Australia by the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service in each of the years 2016 to 2018 and to date in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46738/19]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is governed by the provisions of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended. All applications for a certificate of naturalisation are processed and assessed individually in accordance with the provisions of the Act.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements, not only within the State but also at European Union as well as international level. It is important, therefore, that appropriate procedures are in place to ensure that the integrity of the regime for granting Irish citizenship through the naturalisation process is held in high regard both at home and internationally. These procedures are continually evolving such as reflecting the need to respond to changing international circumstances and also to ongoing service improvements due to the introduction of new technology and work practices.

The following table sets out the number of certificates of naturalisation applications that have been granted to citizens of the United States of America and Australia for the years requested by the Deputy.

Country	2016	2017	2018	2019 to date	Total
U.S.A	232	177	195	104	708
Australia	36	32	32	21	121

Garda Resources

139. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the amount spent by An Garda Síochána in updating the Garda computer aided design system in 2017, 2018 and to date in 2019, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46739/19]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The resources provided by Government to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with an allocation for 2019 of €1.76 billion, as well as capital investment amounting to €92 million. I am pleased to have secured an overall increase of €122 million to increase An Garda Síochána's budget for 2020 to an unprecedented €1.882 billion for next year in addition to €116million in capital investment.

In total, €342 million is being invested in Garda ICT infrastructure between 2016 and 2021.

Decisions in relation to the provision, allocation and management of Garda equipment and resources are matters for the Garda Commissioner. As Minister, I have no role in such matters. I understand, however, that a wide range of programmes are being pursued with the benefit of the ongoing substantial investment in Garda ICT infrastructure.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the computer aided dispatch (CAD) system currently in use in An Garda Síochána was originally installed in the Dublin Metropolitan Region in 1987 and that the system was substantially upgraded in 2010. I am informed that the CAD system is fully operational and a current support and maintenance agreement is in place with the system supplier.

CAD is a key enabler for the Garda Control Room Strategy, under which An Garda Síochána is streamlining the number of control rooms, managing first contact and incident response nationwide. The system supports regional control rooms serving the Dublin Metropolitan Region and Eastern Region, the Western and Northern Region and the Southern Region, with the South Eastern Region planned for go-live later this year.

In line with the Implementation Plan for the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, 'A Policing Service for the Future', it is planned to procure a new CAD system to support the regional control room structure and replace the existing system. It will incorporate the latest control room technology, including mapping, mobile computing, automatic vehicle and person location, and digital radio and telephone integration.

I understand that An Garda Síochána is working to progress the matter, however, as the Deputy will appreciate, so as not to compromise the procurement process of the new CAD system, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on what is a live procurement process.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that they are preparing information in relation to the years 2017 and 2018 and I will provide that information to the Deputy once received.

Refugee Appeals Tribunal Data

140. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of persons that received a decision from the International Protection Appeals Tribunal declaring them to be a refugee that have not received such a declaration; the length of time in months persons are awaiting such a declaration; the reason for the delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46767/19]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I should inform the Deputy that a decision letter from the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT) is not in itself a decision in relation to the grant or refusal of international protection. It is rather a decision of an appeal against a recommendation of the International Protection Office (IPO) to refuse an application for international protection.

There are currently some 140 cases which have received a positive decision from the IPAT. The average time taken in 2019 for ministerial grants to issue following an IPAT decision is 4 months. It is necessary for my Department to carry out the due diligence on each recommendation, before a formal grant letter can issue from my Department granting refugee or subsidiary protection status. The process involves certain checks in relation to each case, which may include identity checks. The average time can be distorted by some more complex cases that take somewhat longer to process.

I can assure the Deputy that applicants receive a ministerial decision in relation to their international protection applications as soon as possible following a decision of the IPAT.

Garda Vetting of Personnel

141. **Deputy Shane Cassells** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if a person (details supplied) will be granted Garda clearance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46842/19]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will appreciate, the primary purpose of the employment vetting carried out by the Garda National Vetting Bureau is to seek to ensure the safety of children and vulnerable adults. This is a very important task which must be done thoroughly and correctly.

The processing of vetting applications by the National Vetting Bureau is an operational matter for the Garda authorities and is carried out in accordance with the provisions of the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012-2016 and other relevant law, including the Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions and Certain Disclosures) Act 2016.

My Department has no role in the processing of individual vetting applications.

I understand however that applicants can track the process of their application online using the e-vetting tracking system, details of which are contained in the email received by applicants when completing their application online.

I further understand that the National Vetting Bureau has a dispute process for vetting applicants who wish to dispute the detail contained in a vetting disclosure.

Finally, I understand that while it is the role of the National Vetting Bureau to provide vetting disclosures, it is for individual employers and organisations to determine their own vetting requirements and to assess the relevance of disclosed convictions to the vacancies they seek to fill. I understand, therefore, that it is not necessarily the case that the disclosure of a previous conviction to a potential employer or organisation will mean that they will automatically not consider a person for employment or engage them for services.

Legislative Reviews

142. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when his Department began examining legislating for hate crime; the reason for the delay in bringing forward legislation in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46850/19]

143. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality further to Parliamentary Question No. 317 of 5 November 2019, the details of the review of the incitement to hatred legislation carried out by his Department or on behalf of his Department since 1989; when each review was commenced and concluded; the recommendations of each review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46853/19]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 142 and 143 together.

The Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989 has been the subject of ongoing Departmental review.

As set out in my response to Parliamentary Question 317 of 5 November 2019, an external review of the 1989 Act was carried out in 2008. The review, entitled "Combating Racism and Xenophobia through the Criminal Law", was conducted by the Centre for Criminal Justice, University of Limerick, in conjunction with the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism. This review was published in September 2008.

As set out in my previous reply, the review concluded that "the complex nature of the offences in the 1989 Act arises primarily from the overriding need to balance fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression, privacy and basic principles of criminal liability, with the need to protect individuals and groups against vicious racist abuse".

The 2008 review recommended that legislative change alone would be insufficient and that measures to address racism should be included as part of an overall integration and anti-racism strategy, including education and public awareness programmes and a wide range of measures to ensure migrant and minority communities are more included in Irish society.

Among other conclusions and recommendations, the review:

- identified a need for guidance for judges so that they consider racism as an aggravating factor deserving a tougher sentence.

- recommended an update to the Act specifically to include "racism on the internet".

- recommended that those involved in the Courts, the Police and the administration should be trained on the full extent and potential of all existing legislation to deal with racism.

- cautioned against introducing specific 'aggravated offences', expressing the view that these would be too difficult to prove.

- calls for stronger 'flanking measures' to support effective implementation of existing legislation, including:

1. A detailed Annual Report from Gardaí on crimes involving racism

2. The systematic monitoring and reporting of cases involving racism by the Courts Service

3. Additional resources for the Gardaí and the training of 'ethnic liaison officers'

4. Establishment of consultative forums across all Garda Divisions to liaise with minority communities

5. Initiatives to encourage reporting of crimes

6. Support for victims' bodies including adequate training

7. The requirement for all local authorities to include policies to address racism in their strategic planning process.

The Deputy will appreciate that the majority of these recommendations have been implemented in the intervening period.

The Department keeps all legislation under review on an ongoing basis.

The review of the 1989 Act being conducted at present by my Department is designed to identify how our legislation on hate speech, including incitement to hatred, can be made fit for purpose in a modern democracy. This review is one part of a suite of measures which will include the development of new legislation on both hate speech and hate crime.

As part of the review, I launched a public consultation process on 24 October, which is open and will gather the views of communities, experts and all interested persons on how our incitement legislation should be changed to make it fit for purpose. Details of the consultation are available on my Department's website. The consultation runs until 13 December 2019 and I encourage all those who wish to contribute to go to the Department's website at www.justice.ie for further information.

Separately to the work on incitement, my Department is finalising research on the effectiveness of the different legislative approaches to tackling hate crime in other countries, in order to learn from experience elsewhere and use this information to identify the approach that will be most suitable for Ireland. When this research has concluded I will bring forward proposals for new hate crime legislation. These will be published and the views of experts, communities and the public will be taken into account.

This work is complemented by the work of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment, who are preparing legislation in relation to the regulation of tech companies in respect of harmful content. This provision for a regulator to oversee online safety, which has been widely discussed and is in line with the recommendations of the Law Reform Commission Report. This legislation is where issues such as codes of conduct for tech companies, requirements to put measures in place to deal with harmful content and so forth will be dealt with.

The Deputy will appreciate that this is a complex area but the approach being taken - including research and providing the opportunity for experts and members of the public to provide their views through consultation - will help to ensure that the legislation we develop will deliver a safer, fairer and more inclusive Ireland for everyone.

Finally, alongside the criminal law, my Department has also been responsible for bringing forward a number of inclusion strategies which are designed to promote equality and inclusion and to tackle discrimination and prejudice. These strategies include the Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021, the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020 and the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020. We will shortly launch a National LGBTI+ Strategy. The Progress Report for the mid-term review of the Migrant Integration Strategy identified the need for strong actions to combat racism and these are currently being advanced.

Trade Strategy

144. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the degree to which her Department continues to monitor global trade or financial markets with a view to identifying opportunities to compensate for Brexit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46880/19]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): While the UK is and will remain a major market for Irish companies, expanding the Irish export footprint in markets beyond the UK is a key priority. In that context, Enterprise Ireland's strategy is to support Irish exporters to be more innovative, competitive and market diversified.

The Irish exporting landscape is strong and companies in Ireland are succeeding in winning business worldwide for their products and services. Enterprise Ireland client companies achieved record levels of exports in 2018 of €23.8bn, against the backdrop of Brexit uncertainty. In 2018, the Eurozone region, which is a key focus of Enterprise Ireland's diversification strategy, saw growth of 7.6% to €4.8bn, with Germany, France and the Netherlands each exceeding €1bn in exports. Exports to North America increased from €3.87bn in 2017 to €4.08bn in 2018, an increase of 5.5%. Our Enterprise agencies are now opening new offices around the world to support our companies in competing and thriving in global markets.

Ministerial-led Trade Missions support the Government's major drive towards market diversification. The majority of trade missions are taking place to the Eurozone, North America and Asia Pacific, which represent the strongest growth opportunities for Irish companies. These Trade Missions focus on promoting the innovative capabilities and competitive offerings of Irish companies to international buyers in sectors including internationally traded services, fintech, high-tech construction, engineering, ICT and lifesciences.

As well as the global efforts supported by our agencies, key to our success has been our commitment to trade liberalisation in order to open new markets for our indigenous sectors. The EU has successfully concluded a number of important trade agreements with trading partners and is in the process of negotiating or upgrading its agreements with many more. The existing suite of EU Free Trade Agreements and new trade deals will continue to be very important for Ireland. With a small domestic market, further expansion in other markets is essential to our continued economic growth and, in this regard, Ireland will continue to support the EU's ambitious programme of negotiating new Free Trade Agreements, opening new markets for Irish companies and increasing export and investment opportunities.

Departmental Funding

145. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the funding available to a non-profit centre (details supplied) that wishes to expand to Letterkenny,

County Donegal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46828/19]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am not aware of an application for funding from this body to my Department or its Agencies.

Jobs Initiative

146. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will report on the launch of Future Jobs Ireland on 11 November 2019. [46656/19]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Some two hundred attendees from enterprises, representative bodies, academia, public sector and civil society attended the national Future Jobs Ireland Summit on 7th November in Tangent, TCD's Ideas Workspace.

The Taoiseach addressed the Summit which also featured a key note address by Ms Saadia Zahidi, Managing Director of the Centre for the New Economy and Society of the World Economic Forum. Ms Zahidi spoke on the topic of the future of work and skills: Global megatrends and implications for Ireland followed by Q&A session with attendees.

The purpose of the Summit was for attendees to exchange ideas and provide input to the development of Future Jobs Ireland 2020. The Summit offered stakeholders the opportunity to engage with each other and directly with Ministers in Breakout Sessions and the subsequent Panel Discussion. This year the Breakout Sessions focused on three themes namely Transitioning, Clustering and New Modes of Working which were chaired by Minister Humphreys, Minister Creed, Minister Ring, Minister Doherty, Minister McHugh, Minister Mitchell O'Connor, and Minister Breen.

The Summit was live streamed for transparency and to encourage wider engagement. Summit briefings along with videos of the presentations and panel discussions will be made available on my Department's website: https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Business-Sectoral-Initiatives/Future-Jobs/Future-Jobs-Ireland-Summit/.

My Department and the Department of the Taoiseach are currently working with the other Government Departments and other stakeholders to develop new commitments for inclusion in Future Jobs Ireland 2020 which is expected to launch in early 2020.

IDA Ireland Site Visits

147. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of IDA visits to counties Wexford, Carlow and Kilkenny in 2018 and to date in 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46854/19]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Regional development remains a key priority of mine as Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation. Together with my Department and its enterprise Agencies, I am focused on strengthening investment and job creation all over the country. In 2018, 56% of all net new jobs created by IDA Ireland were in locations outside Dublin. Similarly, every region in Ireland, including the South-East region, posted net gains in jobs last year.

When it comes to foreign direct investment (FDI), site visits do represent a valuable tool through which investors can be encouraged to invest in regional areas. However, as I have said before, site visit activity does not necessarily reflect investment potential, as a significant percentage of all new FDI comes from existing IDA client companies. In 2018, there were three site visits to County Wexford while Carlow and Kilkenny hosted seven and five site visits respectively. Site visits to these counties are trending in the right direction with four site visits to Wexford, seven site visits to Carlow and 12 site visits to Kilkenny as of the third quarter of this year.

The overall outlook for FDI is positive for Wexford, Carlow and Kilkenny. In 2018, there was a 5% increase in employment by IDA client companies in Wexford with 152 net new jobs added last year. Carlow has witnessed a 31% increase in FDI employment with 275 net new jobs added last year. While there were no new FDI-supported jobs created in Kilkenny in 2018, it is encouraging to note a number of recent announcements by Security Risk Advisors and AB Agri with both companies planning to create 50 new jobs each.

While progress has been made in helping to generating new investment in Wexford, Carlow and Kilkenny, the Government remains determined to attract more FDI to the South-East region. The work of the IDA is obviously key in that respect and the Agency's staff will continue engaging with its clients, as well as the other enterprise agencies, to help create more jobs and economic opportunities.

Health Services Provision

148. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the contingency plan for access to milk bank supplies from the UK in the event of a no-deal Brexit; the way in which supplies would be impacted under the proposed EU-UK deal; his plans to establish a milk bank here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46851/19]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): As the question relates to service matters, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

HSE Funding

149. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health the amount of funding an organisation (details supplied) received in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46711/19]

150. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health the amount of funding an organisation (details supplied) received from the HSE in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46712/19]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 149 and 150 together.

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 questions relate to service matters, I have arranged for the questions to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

Services for People with Disabilities

151. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the feelings and concerns of those with disabilities who have visited a holiday centre (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46718/19]

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.

Services for People with Disabilities

152. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be seen by an early intervention team; and if the liaison officer will contact their parents directly. [46719/19]

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.

Departmental Funding

153. **Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Health when additional funding will be made available to a service provider (details supplied) to enable it to meet its needs for both adults and children. [46723/19]

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 a service issue, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

Medicinal Products

154. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered a report concerning sodium valporate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46729/19]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I am due to receive a briefing on the HSE's Valproate Response Project from officials in my Department in the coming days. I will consider the report in full at that time.

Respite Care Services Provision

155. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if assistance will be provided to a family (details supplied) in County Cork to secure additional respite overnights for their child in view of the circumstances that apply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46732/19]

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.

Patient Transfers

156. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the reason private ambulances are being ordered to transfer patients from Letterkenny University Hospital to other hospitals in view of the fact the national ambulance service has at times two or three intermediate ambulances set aside that could be utilised for this purpose. [46734/19]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service issue, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply.

Hospital Beds Data

157. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the number of beds operational and the number of nurses working in community hospitals (details supplied) in County Donegal in each of the years 1999 to 2018 and to date in 2019, in tabular form. [46735/19]

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.

Autism Support Services

158. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the waiting time for assessment for a place in an ASD unit in counties Cork and Kerry. [46737/19]

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 Insurance Data

159. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons availing of private health insurance in age groups (details supplied) [46755/19]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Membership of the private health insurance market as of 1 July 2019 by age group:

Age Group	Number of insured persons
0-17	498,145
18-29	240,653
30-39	287,694
40-49	340,788
50-54	150,746
55-59	141,638
60-64	128,676
65-69	113,113
70-74	95,672
75-79	64,760
80-84	41,176
85+	28,227

Services for People with Disabilities

160. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the HSE is improving services for children and adults with intellectual disabilities that also have mental health issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46756/19]

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.

Hospital Groups

161. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if an independent external facilitator to engage in a consultative process in respect of Midlands Regional Hospital, Portlaoise, has been appointed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46765/19]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As I have outlined previously, no decision has been made yet on the draft Action Plan for Portlaoise Hospital. I committed to ensuring that local clinicians and the community would be consulted with before a decision is made. The appointment of an independent external facilitator for the consultation process is being progressed. The outcome of the consultation process will be a submission from my Department, setting out the key findings from the consultation process and recommended response to inform me in making a final decision on the draft Action Plan.

Health Services Provision

162. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if home care services will be reviewed for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46777/19]

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.

HSE Staff Recruitment

163. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE will commence the employment of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46779/19]

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.

Cross-Border Health Services Provision

164. **Deputy Lisa Chambers** asked the Minister for Health the number of women that applied for reimbursement under the cross-border directive having undergone treatment for endometriosis abroad; and the number of applications approved and refused, respectively. [46784/19]

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

Home Help Service Provision

165. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) will be assigned weekend home help hours. [46805/19]

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.

Occupational Therapy Provision

166. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Health the wait time for children that are waiting to receive an appointment with an occupational therapist (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46820/19]

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 Funding

167. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Health the status of capital funding of €25,000 for a centre (details supplied) in County Carlow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46821/19]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

Treatment Abroad Scheme

168. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Health if procedures have been carried out in private hospitals or facilities in the past five years under the treatment abroad scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46822/19]

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

Home Help Service Provision

169. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of extra home help hours for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46834/19]

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 Waiting Lists

170. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an operation for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46839/19]

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, since 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.

Primary Care Centres Provision

171. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health when projects (details supplied) will move to advanced planning stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46843/19]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility for the provision, along with the maintenance and operation of Primary Care Centres and other Primary Care facilities, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Hospital Appointments Status

172. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appointment in University Hospital Kerry for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46846/19]

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, since 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

173. **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. [46855/19]

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, since 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

174. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive an appointment for a heart bypass; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46856/19]

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, since 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

175. **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. [46867/19]

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, since 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

176. **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. [46869/19]

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, since 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

177. **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. [46870/19]

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, since 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

178. **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. [46871/19]

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, since 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.

Health Services Provision

179. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health when services will commence at a residential health facility (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46887/19]

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 a service issue, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Provision

180. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a CAMHS appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46888/19]

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.

Services for People with Disabilities

181. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE will provide a person (details supplied) in County Kerry with a placement in assisted living; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46901/19]

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 a service issue, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

Ambulance Service

182. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the reason the HSE is continuing to refuse to pay the Dublin Fire Brigade for the ambulance service (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46904/19]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Dublin Fire Brigade (DFB) provide emergency ambulance services in Dublin city and county, by arrangement between Dublin City Council and the Health Service Executive. As the funding arrangement is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to you directly.

Beef Industry

183. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of withdrawals from the beef exceptional aid measures scheme since approval letters issued; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46713/19]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The objective of the Beef Exceptional Aid Measure (BEAM) is to provide temporary exceptional adjustment aid to farmers in the beef sector in Ireland subject to the conditions set out in EU Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1132. Applications for BEAM were accepted from 19th August to 20th September 2019.

34,517 approval letters issued to eligible BEAM applicants on the 11th October 2019 and since that date, 533 applicants have asked to be withdrawn from the scheme. A further 182 appplicants had already requested to leave the scheme prior to the approval letters issuing giving a total of 715 applicants who have withdrawn their BEAM applications to date.

Basic Payment Scheme Payments

184. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of farm payments for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46724/19]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The person named submitted a 2019 Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) applicaiton on 3 May 2019 in which he declared a share on two commonages in County Kerry.

An over claim has occurred on one of the commonages which my Department is currently reviewing.

The person named has been requested to submit evidence of his entitlement to claim on this commonage and once this information is received, my Department will further process his application.

Irish National Stud

185. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of his most recent meetings with the CEO and-or chairperson of the Irish National Stud; the issues discussed; if further meetings are planned in the coming months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46741/19]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Irish National Stud Company is a commercial State Body.

I last met the Chair of the Irish National Stud, on Tuesday 11th April 2017. The items discussed during the meeting included an update on the financial performance of the stud, the establishment of a new visitor experience and the setting up of a subsidiary company.

I also met both the Chair and the CEO of the Irish National Stud at a number of industry events, including the Equine Summits held November 2017 and in April 2018.

My officials are in regular contact with officials at the Irish National Stud. The Secretary General of the Department met the Chair in May 2019 and regular governance meetings are held at official level throughout the year.

Crop Losses

186. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider reintroducing the weather related crop loss support measure scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46763/19]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): As the Deputy will be aware, extreme weather conditions in September 2016 adversely impacted the harvesting of tillage crops. I launched the Weather Related Crop Damage Measure to provide financial assistance to farmers in approved cases as a contribution towards the direct losses arising from damage to spring barley, spring wheat, spring oats and spring oilseed rape.

Support was only payable in cases where the loss in crop yield to the applicant exceeded 30% as determined by off-farm sales and showing that the loss had been caused solely by the wet weather in September 2016.

Weather conditions in 2019 were generally such that the harvest of those crops covered by the scheme was completed satisfactorily. I have therefore no plans to re-introduce the Weather Related Crop Damage Measure this year.

Agriculture Scheme Payments

187. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when BPS and ANC payments will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46793/19]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The person named submitted an application for the 2019 Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and Areas of Natural Constraint (ANC) Scheme on 14 May 2019.

In relation to the BPS application, my Department has no record of the person named holding any BPS entitlements which could form the basis for payment under the 2019 BPS.

In relation to the ANC application, the agricultural advisor of the person named submitted details in relation to the stocking requirements under the Scheme. My Department has responded to seek clarification on a discrepancy in this data and a reply is awaited. An official from my Department will make contact with the advisor in question to assist in obtaining the clarification required.

Fishing Industry Data

188. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of sprat fishery landed by Irish boats at ports here in each of the years 2014 to 2018 and to 31 October 2019, in tabular form; the percentage processed for human consumption versus those processed for fishmeal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46835/19]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The data requested is held by the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) and I have referred the Deputy's request to the SFPA for attention and direct reply.

Departmental Funding

189. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if grants are available to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46838/19]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Projects of this nature referred to by the Deputy may be eligible for support under the LEADER 2014-2020

Programme which is administered by the Department of Rural and Community Development on behalf of my Department. In order for a project to be eligible for LEADER funding, it must be compatible with the actions outlined in the approved Local Development Strategy for the relevant LEADER sub regional area, and it must comply with the Operating Rules and EU Regulations in place for the programme.

The decision to approve a project, or otherwise, is a matter for the Local Action Group (LAG) which administers the programme in each LEADER Sub-regional area. Interested applicants should, in the first instance, contact the relevant LAG through its Implementing Partner to discuss the funding that may be available.

The Implementing Partner for the area of Kerry referred to by the Deputy is IRD Duhallow CLG, James O'Keeffe Institute, Newmarket, Co. Cork.

Contact details for IRD Duhallow CLG are as follows:

- Telephone: (029) 60633

- E-mail: duhallow@irdduhallow.com.

Fodder Crisis

190. **Deputy Shane Cassells** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on whether there is sufficient fodder available for winter 2019-2020 in the event of a cold snap; if an analysis has been carried out on fodder stocks for winter 2019-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46866/19]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): In 2018, a late spring and prolonged period of dry weather during the summer resulted in a difficult grass growing season in that year with subsequent reduction in fodder conservation. For 2019, Teagasc data, using its grass growth monitoring service, 'PastureBase Ireland', has shown that grass growth throughout 2019 generally returned to normal levels. These favourable growing conditions allowed for ample quantities of fodder to be conserved. This is supported by the fact that fodder prices throughout 2019 were significantly depressed on 2018 prices indicating adequate supplies.

Whilst it is not possible to predict the duration or severity of the coming winter and its resultant impact on fodder availability, I am satisfied that there are currently sufficient stocks of fodder available. I can assure the Deputy that I, together with my officials, will continue to engage with stakeholders and closely monitor the situation over the course of the next few months.

Bord na gCon Staff

191. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of employees as of November 2019 that are employed by the Irish Greyhound Board; the breakdown of roles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46872/19]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Bord na gCon is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. Bord na gCon is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Please see below the requested details as supplied to me by Bord na gCon.

Bord na gCon Group total:

Full-time employees: 131

Part-time/Casual employees: 699

Total employees: 830

The roles are broken down as follows:

Bord na gCon Employees

Limerick Head Office: 36

Breakdown of roles:

No.	
4	IT
9	Finance
5	Regulation
4	Laboratory
5	Sales and Marketing
3	Welfare
5	General Administration
1	Health and Safety

Sales Centre (Thurles): 7

Stewards: 14

Track Located: 48 full-time and 109 part-time/Casual

Total: 214

Events & Hospitality Services (Catering Division) employees

Full-time: 22

Part-time/Casual: 329

Total: 351

Tote – Betting Division

Full-time: 4

Part-time/Casual: 261

Total: 265

Common Agricultural Policy Negotiations

192. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if delays in finalising the EU budget will impact on the CAP budget; if so, the effects on schemes

supported through CAP funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46902/19]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The European Commission recently presented two proposals to provide for transitional regulations to bridge the period between the current CAP programming period (2014-2020) and the CAP post-2020 (2021-2027). Transitional measures such as this are normal between programming periods where a gap arises due to the challenging nature of finalising the new EU Budget and CAP regulations, which require unanimous agreement.

The proposals provide for a one-year transition period in 2021. Funding arrangements for transition are based on the Commission's proposals for the new EU Multiannual Financial Framework. My officials are currently examining the proposals, which will be discussed in Brussels in the coming months and are to be agreed with the European Parliament.

It is important to note that the existing rules and financial arrangements for CAP, including the EU Budget allocations for the period 2014-2020, will apply for 2020, as set out in the relevant CAP regulations for both Pillar 1 and Pillar 2.

My key priority remains to continue to press for agreement on the CAP reform proposals and on the maintenance of the CAP budget as part of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework.

Since the launch of the proposals on the Multiannual Financial Framework, I have worked closely with other Agriculture Ministers to seek to maintain the level of CAP funding for the EU 27 and to reverse the cuts. From the start of this process, I joined with my colleagues in Madrid in May 2018 and together with France, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Finland signed a Memorandum to call for the maintenance of the CAP budget.

Work on this initiative has continued and, most recently, at the October Agrifish Council, I again joined with my colleagues across Europe when 17 Member States joined a declaration seeking to maintain CAP funding in the period post-2020. I will continue to work with my European counterparts to fight for a strong CAP budget, and to ensure the best possible outcome for Irish farmers from the CAP post-2020 negotiation process.

Waste Management

193. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment his plans to support various community initiatives around the country to roll out reverse vending machines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46716/19]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Government is determined to reduce the excessive use of plastics. As a first step, the purchase of single use plastics has been banned throughout the public service. We are determined to increase recycling of plastics from 37% now to 55% in the coming years and, along with other EU member states, to phase out non-recyclable plastics entirely. A Deposit and Return Scheme is one option proposed for EU member states to consider as a means of increasing the collection of plastic beverage containers and achieve the new 90% target for this waste stream identified in the Single Use Plastic Directive.

A number of grass roots community initiatives are emerging across the country which support responsible waste management, which I welcome. However, the introduction of a new national initiative such as a Deposit and Return Scheme needs to be fully understood and the costs and impacts identified to make evidence-based decision making. In January this year I announced a national study which will consider how we can deliver a 90% collection target for single use beverage containers, including plastic bottles in Ireland. This study will also examine the possibility of introducing a Deposit and Return Scheme and how this might operate in an Irish context. This study will be completed in the coming weeks.

Electricity Grid

194. **Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the position regarding the export of surplus power to the national grid by members of the farming community in view of the number of farmers that are now developing on-farm solar PV for their farm enterprises under the TAMS 2 scheme which is operated by the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine and that may have surplus power which can be exported to the national grid. [46727/19]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Climate Action Plan sets out the comprehensive list of actions that will ensure we meet our 2030 climate commitments putting us on a trajectory to be net zero by 2050. One of the Plan deliverables will be the development of a support policy for micro-generation, which will provide a pathway to the public to participate in and benefit from this transition. Action 30 of the Plan sets out the steps necessary and timelines for the delivery of an enabling framework for micro-generation by June 2021. A Microgeneration working group has been established with the participation of the Department of Agriculture and consideration of the work programme is underway. The Group will assess possible mechanisms for payment of exported electricity by renewable self-consumers for each market segment including agriculture.

In July 2018 my Department launched a new micro-generation grant scheme to support domestic customers who install solar photovoltaic panels in their homes. The pilot scheme, which is administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, was subject to a review in recent months. The SEAI indicate that of the 2,500 applications made to date, over 1,400 successful installations have been completed to a value in excess of €3 million in funding. Additionally, 28 farms have applied for support from the TAMS scheme for Solar PV installations.

The Smart Meter Upgrade is a meter replacement programme which will result in the upgrade of over 2 million meters to modern, smart-ready technology. When the programme completes in Ireland in 2024, all domestic and business premises will have a new modern meter installed. The upgrade to smart meters will encourage energy efficiency, support an increase in renewable power on the energy system, and result in lower overall costs for consumers. The installation of smart meters is a key enabler for the energy transition to a decarbonised system and will support the market for micro-generation as outlined in the Government's Climate Action Plan.

Broadband Service Provision

195. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the reason a property at Hopestown, Ballinea, Mullingar, County Westmeath cannot connect to efibre broadband (details supplied). [46754/19]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The premises referenced by the Deputy is in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map, which is available on my Department's website at www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER areas represent the target areas for the proposed State led Intervention under the NBP.

The State intervention is the subject of the procurement process to engage a company to build, operate and maintain the NBP State intervention network.

Since the Government decision in May 2019 to appoint NBI as the Preferred Bidder for the National Broadband Plan contract, work has continued on the due diligence necessary to conclude the contract. This process is progressing towards contract award, which is expected before the end of the year. The network deployment will commence shortly after that.

The Bidder has indicated that the network rollout will take an estimated 7 years from the beginning of deployment. A deployment plan will be made available by the Bidder once the contract is signed.

In the first year of roll out, the Bidder will deploy approximately 300 Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) across all counties. It is anticipated that between 7 and 23 BCPs will be deployed in each county. BCPs will provide a community based high speed broadband service, enhancing online participation and allowing for the establishment of digital work hubs in these locations.

The Bidder is aiming to pass 133,000 premises by the end of the second year, with 70-100,000 passed each year thereafter until roll out is completed.

My Department has recently undertaken a mapping consultation to ensure that the State Intervention Area is up to date and reflects operators' plans and the responses from householders and businesses with the outcome of this consultation informing the State Aid notification to the European Commission in relation to the NBP.

In parallel to the work of finalising the contract, I am considering the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Communications Committee report, which was published recently. I will bring my deliberations of the report to Government in due course.

With regard to the eir fibre rollout close to this premises, eir's rural deployment of high speed broadband is a commercial undertaking and is not part of the planned State Intervention network.

It is not funded by the State and is not planned, designed or directed by my Department in any capacity. The decision as to what areas and premises are served was made by eir internally and on a commercial basis. My Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that process.

Biofuel Obligation Scheme

196. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if a 10% biofuel obligation on the heat sector will be introduced as part of the commitment by Ireland to reduce carbon emissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46764/19]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Biofuels Obligation Scheme, administered by the National Oil Reserves Agency, is the principal support for the uptake of biofuels in Ireland. The scheme was introduced in 2010 and requires suppliers of liquid road transport fuel to ensure that biofuels make up a certain percentage of annual fuel sales in the road transport sector.

Two public consultations have recently commenced which include consideration of a potential renewable energy obligation in the heat sector similar to what is in place in the road transport sector. These consultations are available to view at the following links:

https://www.dccae.gov.ie/en-ie/energy/consultations/Pages/Public-Consultation-on-Biofuels-Obligation-Scheme.aspx https://www.dccae.gov.ie/en-ie/energy/consultations/Pages/Public-Consultation-on-the-Implementation-of-the-Clean-Energy-Package.aspx

The responses received to these consultations will help inform my Department's considerations of the potential for an obligation scheme to be introduced in the heat sector in Ireland.

Broadcasting Service Provision

197. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the reason Lyric FM is being moved from Limerick; his views on whether it is run in a less cost effective manner than the stations broadcast by RTÉ in Dublin; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that this is a blow to the arts and media in Limerick and a lack of commitment by him and RTÉ to Limerick and the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46768/19]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): Section 98 of the Broadcasting Act provides that RTÉ shall be independent in the pursuit of its objects. As such, I, as Minister, have no function in RTÉ's management of their day to day affairs, including the location of broadcast studios and services. My role under section 103 of the Act relates to a situation where a public service broadcasting corporation wishes to increase or vary the number of television or sound broadcasting channels it operates. This is not the case in relation to Lyric FM.

RTÉ has indicated that it will continue to provide a mid-West news service in Limerick and that it is committed to discussing the impact of any changes with those directly affected, via their unions.

The organisation recognises, however, that it must be financially viable while also developing a strategy that repositions RTÉ to take up opportunities in a rapidly changing broadcasting environment.

Departmental Funding

198. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the supports, funding schemes and grants which are available to non-governmental environmental and conservation organisations; the updates to same made in budget 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46770/19]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): There are a number of supports, funding schemes and grants administered directly by my Department which funding can be applied for by non-governmental environmental and conservation organisations. I have set out in tabular format the relevant details.

Details of supports, funding schemes and grants	Updates made in Budget 2020
EV Purchase Grant Scheme - purchase grant of up to €5,000 for new electric vehicles.	€30m has been allocated to this scheme in Budget 2020. The grant of up to €3,800 for businesses purchasing an electric car and the grant for private purchases of vans was discontinued.

Details of supports, funding schemes and grants	Updates made in Budget 2020
Home Charger Grant Scheme - grant of up to €600 towards the cost of the installation of a domestic charge point for purchasers of new and second-hand electric vehicles.	Provided with €0.5m additional funding which will support its expansion to include the installation of charge points in apartment blocks from the first quarter of 2020. Funding for 2020 is now €4m.
Support Scheme for Renewable Heat (SSRH) Phase 1 - Introduced in 2018 - Grant aid of up to of 30% of the installation cost of eligible heat pump technologies. Phase 2 - Introduced June 2019 - Operational support for eligible biomass boilers and anaerobic digestion heating systems via a multi-annual payment, for a period of up to 15 years, on the basis of prescribed tariffs.	€5 million total funding has been allocated as part of budget 2020.
In addition to the An Taisce Green Schools programme the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment also supports An Taisce Environmental Education Unit (Green Schools) in the roll out of its National Climate Change Action and Awareness Programme (NCCAAP) in schools and third level institutes. The aim of this programme is to increase awareness of climate change and promote climate actions nationally. This programme includes: - Teacher training - online and face-to-face training-Secondary school resources packs (Published in March 2019) - Primary school resources packs (under development) - Green schools Climate Action Week (Annually in October) - Climate Ambassador champions in schools, campuses and the community who will work as ambassadors' for climate change to increase awareness of the causes and outcomes of climate change and undertake actions in their schools, campus or community more resilient to climate change by improving their local environment. Over 200 Ambassadors have been trained since 2018.	€263,000 was allocated under the Vote for 2019. Discussions are under way on the development of the 2020 programme, funding will be allocated based on the outputs decided.
Geological Survey Ireland Research Programme	None (no change since 2019)
Geoheritage grant scheme	€65k (same as 2019)
Geoparks	€75k (new for 2020)

In addition to these my Department funds the Better Energy Communities and Sustainable Energy Communities schemes which are administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). These schemes can support the types of organisations referred to by the Deputy as part of wider community energy efficiency projects. Budget 2020 did not announce any updates to these schemes.

Departmental Offices

199. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he will ensure that the office of the just transition commissioner is based in County Offaly or the midlands region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46780/19]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): Mr. Kieran Mulvey has been appointed as Ireland's first Just Transition Commissioner. The Commissioner will help ensure a co-ordinated and effective approach to a Just Transition for communities and workers affected by the imminent ending of peat harvesting for power generation in the Midlands region. The Terms of Reference for the Just Transition Commissioner set out that the secretariat support for the Commissioner will be provided by my Department or the Midlands Transition Team as appropriate. Further details are currently being finalised.

Broadband Service Provision

200. **Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when high speed broadband will be made available in an area in which a business (details supplied) is in operation and recently had to close for the day owing to lack of broadband service. [46797/19]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The premises referenced by the Deputy is in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map, which is available on my Department's website at *www.broadband.gov.ie*. The AMBER areas represent the target areas for the proposed State led Intervention under the NBP. This intervention is the subject of the procurement process to engage a company to build, operate and maintain the NBP State intervention network.

Since the Government decision in May 2019 to appoint NBI as the Preferred Bidder for the National Broadband Plan contract, work has continued on the due diligence necessary to conclude the contract. This process is progressing towards contract award, which is expected before the end of the year. The network deployment will commence shortly after that.

The Bidder has indicated that the network rollout will take an estimated 7 years from the beginning of deployment. A deployment plan will be made available by the Bidder once the contract is signed.

The Bidder has indicated that the NBP State intervention will take an estimated 7 years from the beginning of deployment.

A deployment plan will be made available by the Bidder once the contract is signed. In the first year of roll out, the Bidder will deploy approximately 300 Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) across all counties. It is anticipated that between 7 and 23 BCPs will be deployed in each county. BCPs will provide a community based high speed broadband service, enhancing online participation and allowing for the establishment of digital work hubs in these locations.

The Bidder is aiming to pass 133,000 premises at the end of the second year, with 70-100,000 passed each year thereafter until roll out is completed.

Work continues on finalising the contract and in parallel to this work, I am considering the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Communications Committee report which was published recently. I will bring my deliberations of the report to Government in due course.

European Globalisation Fund

201. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he or Bord na Móna plan to apply to the EU globalisation fund to aid in a just transition in Bord na Móna and elsewhere; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46849/19]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): Ireland's European Globalisation Adjustment Fund Managing Authority is within the Department of Education and Skills. All applications for support from the Fund must be submitted by this Managing Authority. Neither my Department nor Bord na Móna can apply directly to the Globalisation Fund.

My Department has secured support for the Midlands Region from other EU sources. Following proactive engagement by my Department and Bord na Móna the Midlands Region has been included in the Platform for Coal and Other Carbon-Intensive Regions in Transition. Membership of this Platform enables the Midlands Region to avail of the support of a dedicated Country Team, comprised of Commission experts, to assist with the development of strategies and projects for the region. My Department is engaging with the Commission in relation to the establishment of the dedicated Country Team for Ireland and it is expected that the team will visit the Midlands before the end of the year.

The Midlands Regional Transition Team, led by Offaly County Council, has already been successful in securing support from the Secretariat of the Platform. The START team (Secretariat's Technical Assistance to Regions in Transition) will visit the region in early December.

My Department is also engaging with the European Commission on the potential for an introduction of a Public Service Obligation (PSO) to fund an accelerated rehabilitation of the Bord na Móna bogs above and beyond the current, legal requirement on Bord na Móna.

Legislative Reviews

202. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to update the National Tourism Development Authority Act 2003; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46742/19]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): My Department keeps the National Tourism Development Authority Act under review on an on-going basis and amends it where it is deemed appropriate or necessary, including as a result of tourism policy developments. In this regard, I currently have no proposed amendments to the National Tourism Development Authority Act, which was most recently amended in 2016.

Departmental Data

203. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his Department has information sharing agreements with Irish Rail or other public transport providers. [46813/19]

204. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his Department has information sharing agreements with the National Transport Authority or the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. [46814/19]

205. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of times his Department has shared personal identifying information with transport providers, including Irish Rail in each of the years 2016 to 2018 and to date in 2019. [46815/19]

206. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the National Transport Authority has information sharing agreements with his Department or the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. [46817/19]

207. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of times the NTA has shared personal identifying information with transport providers including Irish Rail or the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection in each of the years 2016 to 2018 and to date in 2019. [46818/19]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 203 to 207, inclusive, together.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Free Travel Scheme comes under the aegis of my colleague, the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

I can confirm that my Department does not share any personal identifying data with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, with the National Transport Authority (NTA) or with any transport providers as part of the operation of the Free Travel scheme. Therefore, a need for information-sharing agreements between my Department and these parties on this matter does not arise.

I have referred to the NTA for direct reply, the part of the Deputy's question regarding any sharing of personal identifying information by the NTA with transport providers. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days .

In addition, I understand that the Minister of Employment Affairs and Social Protection will be responding to a similar question from the Deputy relating to arrangements that Department has with the NTA regarding the operation of the Free Travel scheme.

Child and Family Agency Services

208. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the status of the 41 crèches deemed critical by a person (details supplied) during the engagement by Tusla with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on 6 November 2019, by categories; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46778/19]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As the matters to which the Deputy refers are operational matter for Tusla, I have requested Tusla to respond to the Deputy directly within 10 working days.

Departmental Funding

209. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the supports, funding schemes and grants which are available to non-governmental environmental and conservation organisations; the updates to same made in budget 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46771/19]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): I have provided the information requested by the Deputy in the following table. It details the supports, funding schemes and grants which are available from my Department to non-governmental environmental and conservation organisations and the updates to same made in Budget 2020.

DRCD Supports, funding schemes grants available to non-governmental environmental & conservation organisations.	Budget 2020	Description of Support
Dormant Account Fund – Training and Mentoring Supports for Social Enterprises Pilot Scheme (€800k* in 2019).	€2 million has been allocated to Social Enterprise Measure of the Dormant Accounts Fund, the specific breakdown of this funding has yet to be determined, but will be in line with the objectives of the National Social Enterprise policy.	The scheme, administered on the Department's behalf by Pobal, provides supports to organisations providing training and mentoring to social enterprises.

DRCD Supports, funding schemes grants available to non-governmental environmental & conservation organisations.	Budget 2020	Description of Support
Dormant Account Fund – Small Capital Grants Scheme for Social Enterprises (€1m* in 2019).(*The above supports are available to social enterprises operating in all sectors (i.e. healthcare, equality, work integration) including environmental and conservation.)	See above	The scheme, administered on the Department's behalf by Local Development Companies (LDCs), provides grants of between €2,000 and €15,000 for equipment, repairs or refurbishments which will enable social enterprises to improve their service delivery.
Rural Regeneration and Development Fund	€53million	The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund seeks to support ambitious and strategic projects which have the potential to transform rural economies and communities. The Government has committed €1 billion over 10 years to the Fund and €315 million is allocated to the Fund for the period 2019-2022. The Fund sets out to support major coordinated and integrated capital projects which involve co-operation between public bodies and communities, philanthropic funders or the private sector. For the purposes of public financial procedures, however, the lead party to an application has to be a State-funded body, such as a Local Authority, State Agency or LEADER group. It should also be noted that the minimum funding request for Category 1 proposals to the Fund is €500,000. Competitive calls for applications to the Fund are opened on a periodic basis and prospective applicants can familiarise themselves with the objectives and rules of the Fund on the Gov.ie website - https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/c77144-rural-regeneration-and-development-fund/.
LEADER ProgrammeRural Environment theme	Funding allocation is set for overall programmable period (2014-2020). €23.8million allocated allocated to Rural Environment theme.	Depending on the nature of the activity proposed, grant aid is available under the LEADER Programme. Potential applicants should contact their Local Action Group (LAGs) in order to assess the eligibility of their proposed activity.
Community Enhancement Programme	€4.5 million	Community Enhancement Programme provides capital funding to community groups and organisations across Ireland. This allows these groups to enhance facilities in disadvantaged areas.Examples of projects that can be funded include: - IT and CCTV equipment - minor improvements to buildings - minor renovation of community centres - development of community amenities - improvements to town parks, common areas and energy-saving projects

DRCD Supports, funding schemes grants available to non-governmental environmental & conservation organisations.	Budget 2020	Description of Support
Town and Village Renewal Scheme	€15 million	Community Groups may apply for funding through the Local Authority for projects of an environmental or conservation nature that fall within the remit of Town and Village Renewal Scheme Outline.
Community Services Programme	The budget for 2020 has increased by €700,000 to €46.89m	The Community Services Programme, or CSP, supports around 400 community organisations to provide local services through a social enterprise model. The funding is provided as a fixed annual contribution towards the cost of an agreed number of full-time equivalent (FTE) positions including a manager where warranted. Almost €47 million is available under the programme in 2020 to support community organisations, including environmental and conservation organisations. There are currently 35 CSP supported organisations deemed as environmental and conservation organisations, which provide a range of supports and services including recycling, insulation, delivery of the Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme and other SEAI sponsored initiatives. During 2020, these CSP supported organisations will receive funding of c. €4.4m towards the cost of employing 174 FTEs and 34 managers.

Library Projects

210. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the original project budget for a library project (details supplied); the anticipated final budget; the level of engagement by his Department with the relevant local authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46819/19]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): My Department funds a Libraries Capital Programme that will invest c. €26 million in 19 library projects up to 2022.

With regard to that programme, my department operates a Four Stage Capital Management process to ensure value for money and compliance with the Public Spending Code.

My Department engages consistently with all local authorities throughout the capital build process and in relation to the project in question, these engagements have included written correspondence, telephone conversations, and a visit by department officials to the local authority to discuss progress.

The indicative cost of the library project in question, in February 2016, was €8.6m.

The design and planning process took some time to complete and approval to proceed to the tendering stage was issued by my Department in May 2018.

The tendering process is now nearing completion and approval to agree and award a contract, to the preferred bidder, was issued by my Department in September 2019. I am not in a position to divulge the final costs of the project at this time, as contracts have not yet been finalised and signed. I can say however, that my Department has made a commitment to provide a €4m contribution towards the cost of the library, subject to a number of terms and conditions.

Disability Allowance Applications

211. **Deputy Tom Neville** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason a disability allowance payment was suspended for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46717/19]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): Following a review of the entitlement of the person in question, disability allowance (DA) was disallowed with effect from 17 July 2019 as she was deemed to have means in excess of the statutory limit for her circumstances.

The person concerned was notified in writing of this decision on 31 July 2019 and was also notified of their right to request a review of this decision or to appeal it to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO). No request for an appeal or review has been received.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Community Employment Schemes Supervisors

212. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of the current round of negotiations between community employment supervisors and her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46721/19]

215. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of her engagement with representatives of community employment supervisors to discuss their entitlement to an occupational pension as per a 2008 Labour Court recommendation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46733/19]

220. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her views on a matter (details supplied) in relation to the pension entitlements and lack of progression for community employment supervisors; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46792/19]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 212, 215 and 220 together.

The Community Employment Scheme (CE) is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary, fixed term basis.

The programme is delivered through independent Community Employment Sponsoring Bodies. The contract agreement between the Department and the Community Employment Sponsoring Body establishes their role as an independent contractor, responsible for all purposes and all persons recruited by them

CE Supervisors have always been employees of Community Employment Sponsoring Bodies which operate in the community and voluntary sector.

I am currently engaging with representatives of CE supervisors to discuss issues arising following the 2008 Labour Court Recommendation to which my Department and its predecessor as funder (Fas) was not a respondent. The detail of the discussions have remained confidential while the engagement is on-going and I would ask Deputies to respect these wishes and allow the talks to continue free from speculation.

In order to keep discussions open until a solution is found, it is difficult to specify a definitive date by which these discussions will conclude. However, it will take a number of weeks to complete.

Pension Provisions

213. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection further to Parliamentary Question No. 213 of 6 November 2019, if she envisages a conflict between the personal retirement savings account which operates without the need for a central processing agency and the proposals for auto-enrolment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46722/19]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am pleased that the Government recently approved significant elements of my design of an automatic enrolment retirement savings system which will commence in 2022. Key decisions have now been made in relation to the target membership, the contribution rates, the policies in relation to opting-out and re-enrolment, the administrative arrangements and organisational approach and the investment options.

In common with pension systems internationally, Ireland's pension system operates on the basis of a multi-pillar approach. This entails a publicly managed 'first pillar' - the State pension, a 'second pillar', consisting of occupational pensions, and a 'third pillar' consisting of private, individual pension plans funded from personal savings, such as Personal Retirement Savings Account (PRSAs). In order for people to enjoy an adequate income in retirement, the State pension should, in most cases, be combined with a supplementary private retirement savings arrangements in the form of a 'second pillar' occupational pension and/or a 'third pillar' personal pensions.

The aim of automatic enrolment is to improve supplementary pension coverage and adequacy among the high level of those who work in the private sector, who do not have a supplementary pension, and who are likely to experience an unwanted reduction in living standards when they reach retirement.

To coordinate the administration of the automatic enrolment system, a Central Processing Authority (CPA) will be established by the State. The precise operational arrangements for the CPA are currently being worked out.

The automatic enrolment system will be an employment based system linked to earnings. As a second pillar pension, automatic enrolment will complement the existing supplementary pension system, which includes third pillar PRSAs. Therefore, the introduction of the automatic enrolment system, including the setting up of a CPA, will in no way conflict with current private pension plans in the form of PRSAs.

I hope this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Employment Support Services

214. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of the review into all contracted public employment services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46730/19]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The JobPath employment service commenced in 2015 and, under the terms of the contracts signed with the providers, was to run for at least six years comprising two consecutive phases: phase one entailed four years of client referrals, while phase two entailed a ‘run off’ period during which time no additional clients were to be referred. The contract includes an option to extend the term of referrals for a period no greater than two years.

My Department has agreed with the JobPath providers to extend phase one of the contracts for a further twelve months until the end of 2020, which will enable referrals to continue throughout next year. This is not a renewal of the JobPath contracts, but the execution of the extension clauses of the existing contracts.

Indecon, in its reviews of the LES and Job Clubs published in last January, recommended the Department consider the introduction of multiannual contracts and a competitive procurement process for future provision of these services.

This provides my Department with the opportunity to review all contracted public employment services and to design and introduce a comprehensive model that will incorporate various models of response and be fit for purpose for the Irish labour market from 2021 onwards.

In September, my Department published a Request for Tender for consultancy services, to provide advice and support regarding the future of the State’s public employment service and assist with the procurement of contracted public employment services in Ireland, covering the period 2021-2025. It is anticipated that the successful tenderer will provide the Department with a final report in 2020.

Question No. 215 answered with Question No. 212.

Invalidity Pension Eligibility

216. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a person (details supplied) in receipt of a widow’s pension (contributory) from the UK can qualify for invalidity pension here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46736/19]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): Invalidity pension (IP) is a payment for people who are permanently incapable of work because of illness or incapacity and who satisfy the pay-related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions.

To qualify for IP claimants must, inter-alia, have at least 260 (5 years) paid PRSI contributions since entering social insurance and 48 contributions paid or credited in the last or second last complete contribution year before the relevant date of their claim. Only PRSI classes A, E, H or S contributions are reckonable for IP purposes.

If the person concerned has an entitlement to IP under Irish legislation without recourse to her UK contributions, her UK widow’s contributory pension will not affect her entitlement to claim IP.

Entitlement to IP can only be definitively determined on receipt of a completed claim form.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Citizens Information Services Funding

217. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the estimated cost of increasing the Citizens Information Service budget by 8% in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46744/19]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The allocation for the Grant to Citizens Information Board in 2020 is €61.67m, as published in the 2020 Budget Estimates on Budget Day.

The cost of increasing expenditure by 8% would be €4.93m.

JobPath Data

218. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of persons referred to JobPath; the number of those referred that were on the live register for 12 months or more; and the number that were in part-time employment since its introduction, in tabular form. [46772/19]

219. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of referral fees made once, twice, three and four times to JobPath providers in respect of the same persons. [46773/19]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 218 and 219 together.

As the Deputy will be aware the JobPath activation service is to help long term unemployed jobseekers to find sustainable full time work. For the purposes of the departments activation services all long-term unemployed jobseekers on the Live Register, aged between 18 and 61 years old inclusive, are categorised into groups based on their duration of unemployment (e.g. 1- 2 years, 2 – 3 years etc.). Selection for referral to receive employment activation services from a JobPath provider is by means of system based stratified random sampling using these groupings; the objective being to ensure equity in selection and also that people referred to JobPath are a representative of the long term cohort on the Live Register.

The duration of a person’s jobseekers claim is recorded in terms of days of unemployment, any two such periods not separated by more than 52 weeks are considered to be the same continuous period of unemployment - this is known as linking the claims. Long-term jobseekers that may have left the live register to go into employment for less than a year are still considered to be long-term if they reopen their claim within that 52 week period.

The linking of claims allows the client to retain certain entitlements (for example no waiting days and other supplemental benefits) and they are also available for selection for activation services including JobPath.

For those people who are referred to the JobPath service after a short period of work, the support and assistance of their personal advisor will ensure that the skills and experience they have gained in the job are built on if necessary and, that they are factored into all future job applications.

Between July 2015 and October 2019, some 244,219 jobseekers had commenced their engagement period with the JobPath service. Of this number some 33,360 or approximately 14% were working part time & in receipt of a jobseekers payment.

JobPath is a payment by results model and all set-up and day-to-day operational costs are borne by the companies. JobPath providers receive a registration fee each time they register a jobseeker for the service. However the Jobseeker may be withdrawn from the service if they have a change of circumstances. Some common examples of a change of circumstances are for jobseekers to avail of a back to education opportunity or move to another payment, for example disability allowance, illness benefit or carer's allowance. If after their education course has finished they remain unemployed they may be re-registered to a JobPath provider. Clients who move address to an area operated by a different provider of the JobPath service will also be re-registered to the new JobPath provider. Registration fees are only incurred when a client engages with the JobPath service and agrees a personal progression plan.

Between July 2015 and October 2019, 156,787 registration fees have been paid for clients who have been referred once. In the same time period 81,714 registration fees have been paid for 40,857 jobseekers who have had two referrals, of which 27,920 jobseekers were those referred after completing a full previous engagement with the service. The balance of 12,937, were withdrawn from JobPath due to their circumstances changing but subsequently re-referred as they reinstated their jobseekers claim.

4,908 registration fees have been paid for 1,636 jobseekers who have had three referrals, of which 1,330 were those referred after completing two full previous engagements with the service. Lastly there have been 32 registration fees paid for 8 jobseekers who have had four referrals to JobPath, none of whom have previously completed three full engagements with JobPath.

Question No. 220 answered with Question No. 212.

Departmental Data

221. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her Department retains data regarding to the free travel pass in relation to individual journeys undertaken; and the length of time such data is retained. [46806/19]

222. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if it is possible for her Department to identify a person who has taken a single journey on the free travel pass; and if so, if information is shared with transport providers in relation same including but not limited to in the context of fare evasion. [46807/19]

223. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the length of time data is retained in all contexts in relation to the free travel pass; and if there is a policy in relation to the free travel pass and data retention. [46808/19]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 221 to 223, inclusive, together.

No personal data is collected when the free travel pass is used by an individual of journeys undertaken.

Free travel pass usage data, received by my Department, verifies that a person's Free Travel Pass was used at a particular time and date on an ITS enabled vehicle. This data is non-identifying and does not provide journey duration or fare collected.

Free travel pass usage data is retained by my Department for 13 months.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Departmental Data

224. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her Department has information sharing agreements with Irish Rail or other public transport providers. [46809/19]

225. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her Department has information sharing agreements with the National Transport Authority or the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. [46810/19]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 224 and 225 together.

As no personal identifying data is shared by my Department with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport; the National Transport Authority; Irish rail; or other public transport providers, information sharing agreements are not needed.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Departmental Data

226. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of times her Department has shared personal identifying information with transport providers including Irish Rail in each of the years 2016 to 2018 and to date in 2019. [46811/19]

227. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of times her Department has shared personal identifying information with the National Transport Authority in each of the years 2016 to 2018 and to date in 2019. [46812/19]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 226 and 227 together.

No personal identifying data is shared by my Department with the National Transport Authority, Irish Rail or other transport providers as part of the operation of the Free trade scheme.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Domiciliary Care Allowance Applications

228. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of a domiciliary carer's allowance for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46868/19]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): An application for Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA) was received from the person concerned on the 5th March 2019. The application was not allowed as it was considered that the child did not meet the eligibility for the allowance. A letter issued on the 1st May 2019 outlining the decision of the deciding officer to refuse the allowance.

In the case of an application which is refused, the applicant may submit additional information and ask to have the decision reviewed/and or they may appeal the decision directly to the Social Welfare Appeals Office. The options available were advised in the decision letter.

Currently there is no record of either a review request or appeal request having been received in this case.

There are no time restrictions when requesting a review from this department. However, the Social Welfare Appeals Office operate a 21 day limit for the registration of new appeals and an oral hearing can only be granted by that office.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

State Pension (Contributory)

229. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) is receiving a lesser amount in their contributory pension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46903/19]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The person concerned applied for state pension contributory in August 2016 and was awarded a reduced rate based on a yearly average of 17. The persons payment was reviewed under a new Total Contributions Approach (TCA) to pension calculation which included provision for homecaring periods.

In March 2019, the person concerned submitted an application for HomeCaring periods and all periods applied for have been awarded.

Following the award of HomeCaring periods a review took place which resulted in an increase to a rate of 76.73% of maximum pension (or €190.60). This represented an increase on the person's previous pension payment rate of €161.80. Arrears of payment, backdated to 30 March 2018 issued by cheque.

A re-examination has now taken place with additional contributions added for the persons 66th year. The person has 769 reckonable paid contributions which when combined with 801 HomeCaring Periods and 76 reckonable credits results in a payment rate of 79.13% of maximum pension (or €196.50).

A review outcome letter has issued to the person concerned, detailing their new rate of payment. Arrears of payment, backdated to 30 March 2018 will be included with the next payment.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Water and Sewerage Schemes Grants

230. **Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Gov-

ernment the criteria and availability of grant aid of up to €5,000 in circumstances in which a householder has to provide their own drinking water via a new well as an exceptional measure under the rural water programme as announced in October 2018. [46720/19]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Work is at an advanced stage of development for two new schemes to replace existing schemes which assist householders, in certain circumstances, in the provision of on-site domestic water supplies (individual wells) and waste water treatment systems (septic tanks).

The changes that I have approved to the individual wells grant scheme are as follows:

- a maximum grant for rehabilitation works of €3,000 (which represents an increase of 47% on the current maximum grant amount), or where the local authority agrees that the most appropriate solution is to provide a new well, a maximum grant of €5,000;

- Recognising the role of the grant in improving quality, the water quality treatment element (typically filtration and UV filtration) will qualify for 100% funding up to a maximum of €1,000;

- Up to 85% of other costs would be met, subject to the total combined maximum costs of €3,000 for well rehabilitation or €5,000 for a new well.

I expect that the procedures for applying under this new scheme will be completed shortly when the necessary regulations dealing with the financial assistance arrangements and related administrative matters are put in place. This will enable circular letters, terms and conditions, guidance and the application forms to issue to local authorities shortly thereafter.

Departmental Schemes

231. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if a specific region (details supplied) could be used to pilot the relaunch of the national farm plan scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46757/19]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The area to which the Deputy refers is one of the most important nature conservation areas in Ireland. This is reflected in designation of much of the area as a Special Area of Conservation or a Special Protection Area, to protect the diversity of the habitats and species that exist there.

I acknowledge that it is important that the custodians of this area are supported through relevant schemes to manage the environment in an appropriate and targeted way. The Farm Plan Scheme administered by the National Parks & Wildlife Service of my Department offers the opportunity to work with landowners in a proactive way and to go above and beyond the statutory requirements.

While I have doubled the funding of the Scheme in 2020 to €1 million, there is naturally a limit to the resources available for the Scheme. There are numerous farms across Ireland that would benefit from a farm plan, including areas outside the area to which the Deputy refers. Therefore my Department will need to ensure that entry to the Scheme is structured and transparent and to that end specific selection criteria will need to be established. These criteria will be established in advance of the development of new plans that will proceed under budget 2020.

Departmental Funding

232. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the supports, funding schemes and grants which are available to non-governmental environmental and conservation organisations; the updates to same made in budget 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46769/19]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The total funding allocated for Heritage in Budget 2020 is €62.5m, up from €54m last year – an increase of over €8m or 15.5% on 2019 – comprising additional capital provision of €6.75m (up 44%) on 2019 and additional current funding of €1.623m.

Over the course of the last year I have listened very carefully to the extensive public debate on biodiversity loss and the threats to nature. The National Biodiversity Conference in Dublin this year, which I hosted, the development of the Seeds for Nature initiative, the wide ranging public debate on the Heritage Ireland 2030 Plan as well as the extensive engagement across Government on Climate Action were instrumental in my securing significant additional resources for this area.

Engagement with stakeholders, community and conservation groups is an important part of my Department's overall approach to tackling biodiversity loss, and to improving the prospects for our habitats and species. My Department also engages closely with a range of environmental non-governmental organisations to identify areas where they may assist in implementing the National Biodiversity Action Plan, and in our efforts to halt biodiversity loss generally.

A wide range of national NGOs are involved in the area of biodiversity including An Taisce, Birdwatch Ireland, the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, Bat Conservation Ireland, the Irish Peatland Conservation Council and the Irish Wildlife Trust. Many local organisations and groups also carry out important biodiversity related work.

Additionally, the Biodiversity Forum, set up to advise the Minister on the content and implementation of the National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP), includes representatives of landowners, farmers, industry, natural heritage, environmental NGO's and academia. The Forum will continue in its role as implementation of the current NBAP progresses next year.

Funding is available for a range of schemes and programmes to assist NGOs and conservation organisations in carrying out work that supports implementation of the Government's biodiversity strategy, laid out in the Plan. The main schemes are set out in Table 1. From time to time, my Department may also have limited funding available to consider additional projects or supports for biodiversity, with a preference for science based and monitoring projects.

Final decisions on funding for schemes and grants are made each year in the context of the overall resources available and other priorities and pressures within the sector. In some cases, decisions on 2020 allocations have not been made yet as these allocations are subject to internal reviews of the respective schemes in 2019.

Table 1: Funding provided by DCHG to NGOs and Conservation Groups

Organisation	Purpose of Grant Funding	2019 Funding Allocation €	2020 Funding Allocation €
Irish Forum on Natural Capital	Support the work of the Forum on natural capital accounting and ecosystem services	13,000	Decision on 2020 funding will be made in due course.

Organisation	Purpose of Grant Funding	2019 Funding Allocation €	2020 Funding Allocation €
Peatlands Community Engagement Scheme	Grant funding to local community groups, organisations and individuals to support a range of initiatives with community benefit from events, education programmes, promotions, exhibitions, development of conservation management plans, monitoring or surveying work to inform peatland restoration projects, publications, invasive species and fire control measures, anti-littering initiatives to local environmental improvements in the area of the designated raised bogs.	200,000	As above
Community Wetlands Forum	Grant funding to the Community Wetlands Forum via Irish Rural Link. This grant funding is used by IRL for the discharge of salaries and administrative / running costs in order for IRL to continue to employ a part time Development Officer.	25,000	Decision on 2020 funding will be made in due course
Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland	Funding to provide for Irish Officer of BSBI	15,000	As above
An Táisce	Annual funding for biodiversity component of the Green Schools programme	40,000	As above
Woodlands of Ireland	Annual funding to support the core work of the organisation in support of Irish woodlands	38,000	As above
Small Grants Scheme for Recorders	Funding made available to assist biodiversity recorders around the country	25,000	As above
Biodiversity Forum Funding	Funding made available to the Forum to allow it to progress its work in more detail with a view to providing objective scientifically sound advice to the Minister on the implementation of the National Biodiversity Plan	10,000	As above
Irish Raptor Study Group	Grant towards IRSG annual conference	1,000	As above
Irish Environmental Network	Annual funding provided to facilitate programme of events for Biodiversity Week	25,000	As above
The Community Foundation of Ireland	Grant funding provided to fund biodiversity in local communities	100,000	As above

Organisation	Purpose of Grant Funding	2019 Funding Allocation €	2020 Funding Allocation €
Bat Conservation Ireland	Funding provided for production of Batlas 2020	15,975	As above
Birdwatch Ireland	Funding provided through NPWS adverts in BWI 'Wings Magazine' (3 per year)	2,100	As above
Irish Whale and Dolphin Group	Grant towards IWDG cetacean stranding scheme	10,000	
Ulster Wildlife Trust	Grant towards all-Ireland squirrel and pine marten survey	10,000	
Golden Eagle Trust	Raptor reintroduction scheme allocation	35,000	As above

Arts Council Funding

233. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if a budget is available to a local photographer to publish photographs of wildlife on the River Dodder; if other avenues other than the local authority can be pursued in relation to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46774/19]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Primary support for the Arts is delivered through the Arts Council. The Arts Council operates a number of schemes and initiatives have been established for the particular support of visual arts. The Council considers visual arts to include a range of media such as painting, drawing, sculpture, printmaking, photography, live art/performance, film, video or other digital imaging media.

The Arts Council is dedicated to supporting a vibrant community of visual artists, visual arts groups and organisations so that the public can experience the highest standard of visual arts, in urban and in rural parts of Ireland.

The Arts Council offers various funding awards under the Visual Arts for artists, organisations, groups and curators to apply for support. In addition to the grants, awards and schemes offered across all artform areas, a number of schemes and initiatives have been established for the particular support of visual arts. Information on these can be accessed on the Arts Council's website at the following link http://www.artscouncil.ie/Arts-in-Ireland/Visual-arts/Schemes-and-initatives/.

In addition to the above, Culture Ireland operates a range of funding programmes to support and promote the presentation of Irish arts internationally. Under its programme it offers support to Irish professional artists, arts organisations and international presenters to present work by Irish artists at significant international venues and festivals. Culture Ireland considers applications for all forms of the arts, including photography, as defined in the Arts Act 2003: Further information on funding can be accessed at the following link https://www.cultureireland.ie/funding.

My Department's Creative Ireland Programme is a five-year all-of-government, culture-based initiative, led by my Department, that emphasises the importance of human creativity for individual, community and societal wellbeing. The main source of support for community-based activities under the Creative Ireland Programme is Pillar 2 - 'Enabling Creativity in Every Community'. In 2019, a total of €3m has been allocated to all 31 local authorities (€96,000 each approximately) to enable them to support an extensive programme of activities, events and initiatives in each county. In 2018, over 1,200 events took place across all local authorities. Projects funded include arts projects, grant schemes, concerts, conferences, exhibitions, festivals, outreach projects, publications, research programmes, and workshops among other activities. They cover topics such as archaeology, architecture, biodiversity, crafts, heritage, dance, film, history, literature, music, photography, poetry, storytelling, theatre and the visual arts.

In July of this year, I announced the completion of a review of the Percent for Art scheme which will be of interest to visual artists. The outcome of this review led to changes to the scheme's bands and limits which will make significantly increased funding available to the creative community. Many artists have already received high profile commissions for public art works as a result of this scheme and these increases will ensure many more will also benefit. The new limits and bands will apply from 1st January 2020 and details may be seen on my Department's website at the following link https://www.chg.gov.ie/public-art/.

I will shortly be re-establishing an inter-agency group to improve information gathering and collation and sharing of best practice on Percent for Art schemes. This group will also link in with the Arts Council and seek to enhance the Council's existing advisory role in relation to the Scheme.

My Department may from time to time have limited resources available to consider the provision of small amounts of funding for projects that promote the goals and actions contained in the National Biodiversity Action Plan, with a preferred emphasis on projects that have a scientific, monitoring or awareness raising element.

Deer Culls

234. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will address a matter (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46831/19]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I would like to thank the Deputy for again raising this issue. As the Deputy is aware, my Department is committed to the active management of this species within the National Park and, as part of its regular ongoing management operations, carries out localised annual species' counts on State lands, where appropriate. A number of surveys, censuses and reports on the species population have been conducted in recent years, including a comprehensive survey and report in the winter of 2016 on the distribution, population density and population structure in Killarney National Park. This was followed by further census in both the spring 2017 and winter 2018. Preliminary reported results indicate that the population density of one breed is in the region of 11.31 per square kilometre (c. 896) and the density of the other breed is in the region of 6.71 per square kilometre (c. 532).

As a result of the population increasing, certain management issues arise, such as culling. The animals have the potential to impact significantly on woodlands, including the iconic yew, oak and also wet woodlands within the Park, for example by bark stripping of mature trees and preventing regeneration. Therefore, where deer species are increasing in range and numbers, depending on the annual count and instances of damage caused by them to habitats, culls need to be carried out to ensure that populations do not reach levels that would have negative ecological consequences. More than 240 animals were culled between 2015 and 2018. The figures for the 2018-19 cull totalled 272 animals which included both breeds. The cull for the 2019-2020 season is just underway in line with the current Open Season order.

As the Deputy can see, our management of the species in the National Park is extensive and appropriate. However, as I have repeatedly informed the Deputy, management of animals outside of the National Park and in the wider Killarney valley area is a matter for private landholders and culling and control is not the responsibility of my Department, beyond the issuing of section 42 permits.

While the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department licenses the hunting of the animals, the Department does not own the population, they are wild animals and they roam freely throughout the countryside. Wild animals in the State are protected under the Wildlife Acts, however, there is an annual open season during which this species can be legally shot under licence. The open season operates generally from the 1st September to the last day of February, depending on the species and gender. Landowners may also apply to the Department for a permission under section 42 of the Wildlife Acts to cull where necessary outside the annual open seasons. These permissions offer a facility whereby a person can obtain a permit, on a case-by-case basis, to prevent serious damage caused by individual animals on specific lands. Permissions are only issued where there is evidence of such damage.

With regard to the issue of fencing Killarney National Park as I have previously outlined on several occasions, there are no plans to fence the National Park. Fencing is simply not a viable solution and would not achieve the desired results for a number of reasons. Firstly, the presence of the species is not confined to the National Parks and consequently fencing of these properties would serve no practical purpose in terms of wild deer control or management. Secondly, the Park is over 10.000 ha in size, including some rugged terrain. Fencing this area would be an enormous task that is unlikely to result in the desired objective. Thirdly, some smaller animals are capable of going under fencing that is eight inches off the ground, while others are capable of knocking down fences. Finally, the erection of a fence this size could also impact on the sensitive habitats within the Park.

With regard to the issue of Road Safety, this is a matter for the Road Safety Authority and the relevant Local authority. Nevertheless, I am of the view that improving sight lines for motorists as well as improved (possibly larger) signage is likely to be the most effective measure to assist motorists to be vigilant when driving through areas where populations of the animals can be expected. Officials from my Department have previously discussed this with Kerry County Council.

To conclude, the Deputy can appreciate that species management is a complex and multifaceted process. There is a significant challenge in attempting to balance the demands of agriculture, forestry and conservation with the need to ensure that populations occupying the same land resources are managed at sustainable levels, and in a responsible and ethical manner.